

The New Criterion

June 1987

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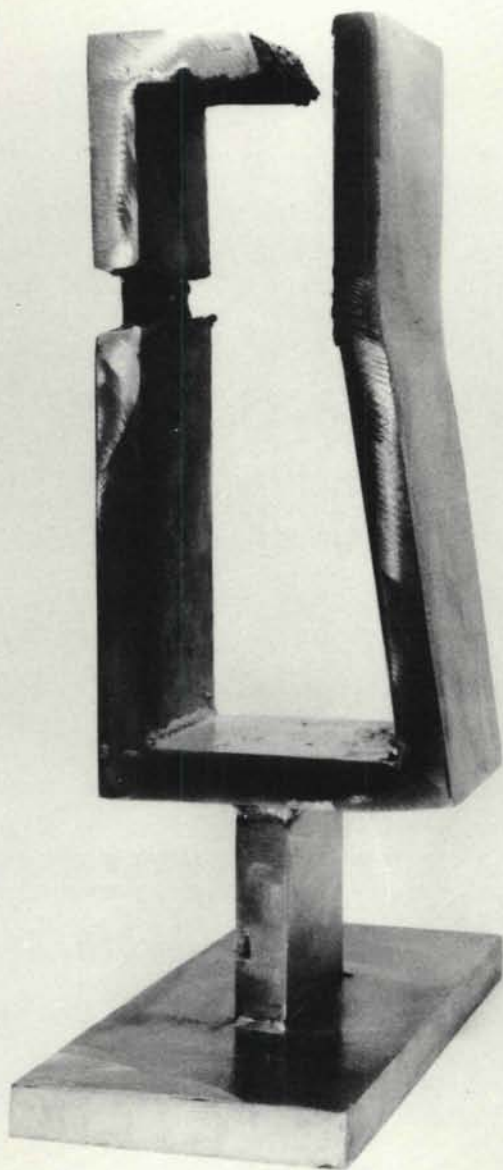
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The New Criterion *June 1987*

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The new Women's museum in Washington

by Hilton Kramer

The inauguration in Washington this spring of a new facility calling itself the National Museum of Women in the Arts is an event to be regretted by everyone with a serious interest in art and a serious interest in art museums. Even in an age which has witnessed a radical and widespread devaluation of the very notion of what an art museum is, and indeed of what art is, this ill-conceived enterprise sets a new low in abandoning even the pretense of adhering to an aesthetic standard. The quality of the objects on view in the opening exhibition at this institution is, for the most part, so abysmally poor and so irredeemably trivial that they constitute a kind of libel on the artistic abilities of the class of people—namely, women—they are intended to exalt. The galleries housing these unfortunate objects are themselves, moreover, a ghastly parody of the kind of genteel taste once associated with the feeblest aspects of feminine sensibility. It is as if every failure of mind and talent ever ascribed to female aspiration in art had been deliberately gathered in one place for the purpose of permanently discrediting arguments on its behalf. The result is a monument to intellectual muddle and mediocrity masquerading as liberal enlightenment—a museum that isn't a museum representing women "in the arts" who are mostly undistinguished as artists in a building so appallingly retrograde and outmoded that it can't be regarded as anything but an indictment of the (female) mind that selected it for this purpose.

The idea of establishing such an institution now, in 1987, is itself something of a fraud, of course, for it is predicated on the assumption that there exists a large and artistically significant body of work created by women artists which has failed for purely political reasons to receive the attention it merits. If this could be said to have ever been true—and the proposition is itself only marginally persuasive even when applied to the past—it is certainly not true now. Everyone knows that museum curators of both sexes have been under intense pressure for years now to accord the work of women artists "equal"—which is to say, preferential—consideration when it comes to selecting works of art for public exhibition and acquisition. Indeed, the same political pressure has resulted not only in more and more women artists being represented in museum collections and exhibitions but in a large increase in the number of women who now occupy curatorial positions in our museums—not to mention the many more women now employed as art critics, art historians, art editors, art consultants, and in other positions of power and influence. In fact, the only museum I can think of which does not employ a female curator on its staff is the National Museum of Women in the Arts!

But then, this is a museum that has opened its doors to the public without bothering to hire any curator at all. It is not only aesthetic standards that have been thrown to the winds; even the most basic

standards of professionalism have been ignored. This is an institution that by its own actions and policies inflicts considerable damage on its own ostensible cause by identifying "women in the arts" with art that is second-rate (or worse—and in some cases, much worse) and with professional practices that are benighted and amateurish. In the name of according the artistic achievements of women some sort of historical parity, this whole enterprise only succeeds in establishing a ghetto-like sanctuary for the kind of art that, with few exceptions, no first-rate museum would ever have an interest in showing. Which means that in the end we are given an institution that stigmatizes as inferior the very thing it claims to rescue from oblivion.

Obviously the trouble lies, first of all, with the faulty vision of the founders, Wilhelmina and Wallace Holladay. For some years the Holladays have apparently devoted much time and money to amassing a huge collection of works of art created by women artists. In this effort they clearly enjoyed a certain advantage, for in the case of most of the things they wished to acquire they could scarcely have encountered much in the way of competition. Judging from the published survey of their collection,¹ they would not appear to be sticklers for aesthetic quality, in any case. Abiding exclusively by a gender-standard in their acquisitions, they have put together a collection that consists very largely of historical curiosities interlarded with mostly second-rate examples of the work of artists already widely known.

There is a tradition, of course, for ambitious American collectors to turn their collections into museums, and to this tradition we owe a number of distinguished institutions that have earned our affection and

esteem. There are the Frick Collection and the Morgan Library in New York, and the Phillips, Freer, and Hirshhorn museums in Washington—to cite only the first names that come to mind. To this list may now also be added the new Terra Museum of American Art in Chicago. That the Holladays' collection is not in a class with any of the above is not the main problem, however, with the project the Holladays have launched. Had they openly erected a monument to their own taste, as others have done, we would still have ample reason to quarrel with the quality of the taste, but the issue to be debated would be the *art*, not the gender of the artists who produced it. By making gender the central desideratum of this enterprise and consigning the question of achievement to an entirely secondary status, what the Holladays have established is less an art museum than a political lobby. Its principal goals lie not in the realm of aesthetics but in the realm of propaganda and persuasion. The very name that the Holladays have appropriated for the institutionalization of their own collection—the National Museum of Women in the Arts—is thus more akin to that of the National Rifle Association, say, than to that of the National Gallery of Art, and the basic purpose of their institution will remain a lot clearer if this distinction is borne in mind.

The great irony surrounding this institution is that it was already hopelessly passé when it opened its doors to the public. As a lobbying enterprise, its rather genteel feminist goals—much more focused on the past than on the present—had already been swamped by the more radical programs of feminist groups far more militant than the Holladays ever dreamed of being; and as a museum serving as a showcase for the artistic achievements of women artists it could hardly be expected to compete with established institutions. (In Washington alone, the Hirshhorn Museum was showing a retrospective exhibition of the work of Nancy Graves on the very day the Holladays opened their museum, and the National Gallery of Art was preparing a major Georgia

1 The volume devoted to the Holladays' collection is called *The National Museum of Women in the Arts* (Abrams, \$35). No editor is cited on the title page—editors, apparently, being as irrelevant to this institution as curators—but the book does carry a dedication to, of all people, Wilhelmina and Wallace Holladay!

O'Keeffe exhibition for the fall.) Feminist politics devoid of ideology and an art program devoid of aesthetic standards—that, I suppose, was the dream that the Holladays thought could be realized in this new museum, and in both respects they have simply shown themselves to be utterly out of touch with the realities, political and cultural, of the present moment.

By yet another paradox, however, it was no doubt precisely because of its distance from both the real world of feminist politics and the real world of contemporary art that the National Museum of Women in the Arts has achieved its only success—its success, that is, in persuading corporate patrons of the arts to lavish funds on the creation of this museum. In the corporate bureaucracies where decisions about funding for the arts are made, there is nothing more appealing than the promise of a project guaranteed to enjoy a wide constituency while at the same time raising no difficult artistic issues. In this respect, at least, the National Museum of Women in the Arts certainly looked like a safe bet—indeed, a fail-safe bet. The promised public was said to consist of no less than half the population! The building selected to house the museum—an ugly Masonic Temple that should have been consigned to the wrecker's ball decades ago—bore an uncanny resemblance to the kind of “postmodern” architecture that is now in vogue for corporate headquarters the country over. And the inaugural exhibition—a pathetic survey called “American Women Artists, 1830-1930”²—was guaranteed to lull an ignorant public into believing it was seeing something significant. Add to this the

fact that the interior of this architectural white elephant has been designed to resemble the setting for a debutantes' tea-dance—though its real purpose is to serve as a catering establishment for corporate dinner parties—and you can see why the funds were so easily obtained.

There was really only one way that the National Museum of Women in the Arts could have made a difference—could, that is, have made a real contribution—to the life of art at the present moment, and that was to have mounted an exhibition of contemporary art by women artists of such staggering aesthetic quality that it would have straightaway set a standard for other museums to follow. But only a museum that was founded on a real commitment to aesthetic quality could have conceived of such an exhibition, and it is doubtful if such a project would have attracted the requisite funds. After all, it might have been controversial. It would certainly have had to exclude a good deal—even, I daresay, much that the Holladays themselves have collected in the contemporary field. At the very least, it would have required the services of a knowledgeable and courageous curator. But it is foolish even to speculate about such an exhibition in this museum, for its cramped and fussy galleries could not by any means accommodate a show that would do justice to the best contemporary art.

My own prediction, for what it is worth, is that the National Museum of Women in the Arts will become, like the building that houses it, a white elephant among Washington's art museums. No doubt it will attract some of the feminist faithful—for a while. But in the long run no one with a serious interest in art, not even the feminist faithful, will want to waste any time on its meager offerings—not with so much else of real aesthetic interest, and for that matter, of real political interest, to look at in Washington.

2 Eleanor Tufts, professor of art history at Southern Methodist University, selected the show and produced the book called *American Women Artists, 1830-1930*, in collaboration with other (female) art historians. Abrams is publishing the book for the National Museum of Women in the Arts.

James Huneker & America's musical coming of age *by Samuel Lipman*

Imagine a small child, said by some to be musically precocious, sitting at a Steinway grand piano more than forty years ago, vainly attempting to show interest in practicing some small pieces of Chopin. The California sun was shining outside, the day was short, and the practice hours were long. The demands of a doting mother and of a piano teacher of the old Russian school were strict even when not severe, and to the child the prospect of a lifetime of practice just possibly someday making perfect seemed dull indeed.

But wait. As the child stared sadly at the music before him, he found something more in those assorted yellow-bound volumes published by G. Schirmer than mere notes, the uninvited causes of his labors; there were words, too, enchanting descriptions of the Polish composer's music. Indeed, the greatness and romance the child could hardly find emerging from his own exertions he found in the words the kind publisher had provided:

During the last half of the nineteenth century two men became rulers of musical emotion, Richard Wagner and Frédéric-François Chopin. The music of the Pole is the most ravishing in the musical art. Wagner and Chopin; the macrocosm and the microcosm. Chopin, a young man, furiously playing his soul out upon the keyboard, the soul of his nation, the soul of his time, is the most individual composer who ever set humming the looms of our dreams Chopin is not only the

poet of the pianoforte, he is the poet of music

There were exciting words, too, for the child about the individual pieces which sat so resistantly on the music-desk of the piano. Descriptions of the pieces the child was attempting to play were understandably the first sought out; here, alas, the child was disappointed, for the commentator's major efforts were devoted to those works of Chopin's beyond the child's technical command and physical grasp. But what magical comments there were for other, indubitably more exciting, compositions, compositions which, with practice, might well be performable when weak fingers were stronger and small hands were larger. Of the C-sharp minor Waltz, opus 64, no. 2, for example, the child read:

The veiled melancholy of the first theme has seldom been excelled by the composer. It is a fascinating lyric sorrow, and the psychologic motivation of the first theme in the curving figure of the second theme does not relax the spell. A space of clearer skies, warmer, more consoling winds are in the D flat interlude; but the spirit of unrest soon returns. The elegiac note is unmistakable in this veritable soul dance.

The reader need remain in suspense no longer. The child so eager to read that the practice hours might pass more quickly was I; more important, the writer of the deli-

cious and educative words that caused my time to move so profitably was James Huneker, a critic not just of music but of literature, drama, and painting, a critic whose historical position as our leading evangelist of the arts remains as firm today as it was at the time of his death in Brooklyn in 1921 at the age of sixty-four.

The coming of intellectual age which Huneker's florid notes in the Schirmer Chopin edition helped hasten for me parallels in a small way the major contribution he is credited with making toward the maturity of American cultural taste in the years before World War I. Indeed, the present received opinion of Huneker was voiced by H. L. Mencken, who liked to see himself as a prophetic figure in America's passage from provincialism to cosmopolitanism. In 1917, Mencken wrote of Huneker:

If the United States is in any sort of contact today, however remotely, with what is aesthetically going on in the more civilized countries—if the Puritan tradition, for all its firm entrenchment, has eager and resourceful enemies besetting it—if the pall of Harvard quasi-culture, by the Oxford manner out of Calvinism, has been lifted ever so little—there is surely no man who can claim a larger share of credit for preparing the way . . .

Mencken's claim is a large one, one which invites consideration of its truth in its own time. It also invites consideration for its relation to our putatively different musical life today. And so my task here will be to examine Huneker's critical career, chiefly with reference to music, but with examples from his writings about the other arts as well, to see just how far forward Huneker did indeed bring our attitudes toward high culture; I shall be concerned also to evaluate just what this artistic coming of age meant for the exact nature of American musical taste then—and now.

James Huneker was born in Philadelphia in 1857, the son of middle-class parents, German or Hungarian on his father's side, Irish

on his mother's. Part of his inheritance was Fenian, for his maternal grandfather was a prominent Irish patriot who had emigrated from County Donegal in 1820; part was music loving and art loving, for his father knew the pianists Sigismond Thalberg and Louis Moreau Gottschalk and the violinist Henri Vieuxtemps. The senior Huneker also owned a large collection of mezzotints, line engravings, etchings, and lithographs, including work by Lucas van Leyden, Dürer, and Rembrandt. His mother, a devout Roman Catholic who had been a schoolteacher before her marriage, wrote well and read omnivorously. Encouraged by his mother, from his earliest days the young Huneker got on well with Jews, studying Hebrew toward a possible future vocation as a priest. In much later life he responded to an Irish streetcar conductor who described the attractive and hilly neighborhood through which the vehicle was passing as "Kike's Peak" with the words: "God was ever good to the Irish and to his own."

The young Huneker didn't have an easy time in school, and made abortive attempts at becoming a railroad engineer, a lawyer, and a piano salesman. He had more success reading literature, quickly becoming acquainted with the work of Poe, Baudelaire, Gautier, and Flaubert. In the spring of 1878 Huneker visited Whitman in nearby Camden, but his father, aware of Whitman's dubious reputation, quickly put an end to the relationship. He was fascinated by the theater, which was in lively shape in Philadelphia in those pre-film and pre-television days. But his real love was music. He took piano lessons, and reveled in the locally produced chamber-music evenings, during which professional musicians played to an enthusiastic audience of amateurs. And while still in his teens, he started to write. His first effort, published in the *Evening Bulletin*, was a report of one such concert.

The 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia whetted the young Huneker's appetite for travel and experience of the wider world. To his already remarkably cosmopolitan upbringing he now added a year of

piano studies in Paris at the end of the 1870s. Though later in life he taught piano in New York at Jeannette M. Thurber's National Conservatory of Music (upon the recommendation of Rafael Joseffy, the Chopin authority and pupil of Liszt), as a student Huneker wasn't good enough to gain admittance to the Paris *Conservatoire*; instead he had to content himself with auditing the class of Georges Mathias, a student of Chopin himself. As it has done for so many susceptible young Americans in the past two centuries, Paris opened Huneker's mind even further to the new in music, literature, and the visual arts.

Huneker, of course, was hardly cut out by either nature or nurture to be an expatriate. But when he returned to the United States he found Philadelphia dull, despite its many musical activities. By now a writer for Theodore Presser's *Etude* magazine, Huneker cast longing eyes toward New York, then as now the center of American music. Finally, in 1886, he moved to New York, there to embark on the career of free-lance critic, which was to describe his way of life and thought for the next thirty-five years.

In New York, Huneker was caught up in a musical maelstrom. The new Metropolitan Opera House on Broadway and Thirty-ninth Street had opened in 1883 with a performance of Gounod's *Faust*; by 1892 all of Wagner's major works (save *Parsifal*) had been given there, and in the 1890s Metropolitan casts for both German and Italian operas reached a level of international distinction only rarely equaled since. In orchestra life, there were numerous and regular concerts by the New York Symphony under the leadership of the Damrosch family, and by the New York Philharmonic under Theodore Thomas in the 1880s and Anton Seidl in the 1890s. After 1887, the Boston Symphony played as many concerts annually in New York as did the Philharmonic. The opening of Carnegie Hall in 1891 was marked by a visit from Tchaikowsky, who conducted there his *Marche Solennelle*, the Third Orchestral Suite, and the B-flat minor piano concerto. European artists were beginning to live in New York as well. Joseffy,

who was born in Hungary, settled in New York after his 1879 debut under Leopold Damrosch; in the early 1890s the great Lithuanian-born pianist Leopold Godowsky established residence in New York, where he taught at the New York College of Music; from 1892 to 1895 the Czech composer Antonin Dvořák was the Director of the celebrated National Conservatory.

In the year of Huneker's arrival he attended the American premiere of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* at the Metropolitan Opera House, paying for a top-gallery ticket by pawning his overcoat. For all his many literary interests, music was his life. Soon after coming to New York he told a story in the *Etude* of a pianist on his deathbed who, asked by a priest whether he were a Catholic or a Protestant, answered: "Father, I am a pianist." In recounting this story, Arnold Schwab, Huneker's invaluable and indefatigable biographer, remarks that Huneker's reply "illustrates his own attitude toward religion"; it seems at least as likely that it illustrates Huneker's own attitude toward music and the piano.

For the next decade and more Huneker bathed in the heady cultural waters of a New York now beginning to combine the economic progress of a century of American independence with the contributions of the successive waves of immigrants—Irish, German, Central European, Balkan, Mediterranean, and Jewish—who were now placing their imprints on our nation. He reveled in the life of the little family hotels, where excellent table d'hôte dinners could be found in the company of artists and intellectual dreamers. Always a lover of Pilsener beer, he was a great saloon-goer, and there too he sampled New York's melting pot. As Huneker's biographer writes: "At Justus Schwab's greasy saloon near the German neighborhood of Tompkins Square, Huneker hobnobbed with French communards, Spanish and Italian refugees, German socialists, and Russian politicals."

All this time Huneker continued to write prolifically for newspapers and periodicals, as he was to do for the rest of his life. By

1899 he was ready to publish *Mezzotints in Modern Music*, his first of some twenty-one books. Two of these books were collections of previously published short fiction, three (among them a short history of the New York Philharmonic) were journalistic hack jobs, one consisted of two volumes of memoirs, and one was a remarkable novel, published shortly before he died. The remainder of Huneker's books were collections of essays on European subjects, based upon his free-lance articles, many of them on recent and romantic music but many also on the new dramatists of the 1890s, modern and classical painters, French and English literature, and the philosophy of Nietzsche.

Echoing in its title his father's collection of black-and-white art, *Mezzotints in Modern Music* established the framework for a critical career of remarkable intellectual consistency. It begins with a ringing article called "The Music of the Future." Curiously for a hot-headed lover of the new in art, but significantly for his critical development, Huneker's projected future seems to belong to Johannes Brahms, not Richard Wagner. In praising Brahms, then perceived as Wagner's archenemy and artistic opposite, Huneker puts his facility for purple prose at the service of an unwavering classic position:

Brahms reminds one of those medieval architects whose life was a prayer in marble; who slowly and assiduously erected cathedrals, the mighty abutments of which flanked majestically upon mother earth, and whose thin, high pinnacles pierced the blue; whose domes hung suspended between heaven and earth, and in whose nave an army could worship, while in the forest of arches music came and went like the voices of many waters.

Elsewhere in *Mezzotints in Modern Music* Huneker is nothing if not eclectic. He writes at length about Tchaikowsky, Richard Strauss and Nietzsche, Chopin, Liszt, and Wagner, mixing praise and reservations. Even when Huneker's reservations are quite severe, the prevailing tone is one that encourages the

reader to seek out the music for himself. Thus in the case of Tchaikowsky, when Huneker finds himself unable to understand the second and third movements of the *Pathétique* Symphony—he describes the five-four meter of the second as "a perverted valse, but one that could not be danced to unless you owned three legs"—he still can find the movement "delightfully piquant music," and call the "touch of Oriental color in the trio . . . very felicitous." And for the famous last movement, Huneker pulls out all the stops of exalted *fin de siècle* literary morbidity:

Since the music of the march in the Eroica, since the mighty funeral music in Siegfried, there has been no such death music as this "adagio lamentoso," this astounding torso, which Michel Angelo would have understood and Dante wept over. It is the very apotheosis of mortality, and its gloomy accents, poignant melody and harmonic coloring make it one of the most impressive of contributions to mortuary music. It sings of the entombment of a nation, and is incomparably noble, dignified and unspeakably tender. It is only at the close that the rustling of the basses conveys a sinister shudder; the shudder of the Dies Irae when the heavens shall be a fiery scroll and the sublime trump sounds its summons to eternity.

Huneker waxes enthusiastic about Richard Strauss's 1896 tone poem *Also sprach Zarathustra*, clearly relishing the linkage between Strauss's music and Nietzsche's iconoclastic philosophy. For Huneker the composition is

the gigantic torso of an art work for the future. Euphony was hurled to the winds, the Addisonian ductility of Mozart, the Théophile Gautier coloring of Schumann, Chopin's delicate romanticism, all were scorned as not being truthful enough for the subject in hand, and the subject is not a pretty or sentimental one. Strauss, with his almost superhuman mastery of all schools, could have written with ease in the manner of any of his predecessors, but, like a new Empedocles on Aetna, preferred to

leap into the dark, or rather into the fiery crater of truth.

Overall, Huneker stresses Strauss's achievements in gaining control over "the indefiniteness of music," and in giving "an emotional garb to pure abstractions." In the end, Huneker is under no illusion that in the union between the superman-poet and superman-composer there can be any winner but the music. His words once again emphasize a belief in the primacy of music:

Poor, unfortunate, marvelous Nietzsche! But it is Strauss mirroring his own moods after feeding full on Nietzsche, and we must be content to swallow his title, "Also sprach Zarathustra," when in reality it is "Thus Spake Richard Strauss!"

From Strauss, Huneker moves back to Chopin, thus embarking on a course he was to take often in his life. Always determined to defend Chopin against charges that he was a sentimental miniaturist, Huneker looks for "the greater Chopin," the classic master of noble forms and large emotions. This Chopin he finds in such then less-played works as the F-sharp major Impromptu, the three Polonaises (those in F-sharp minor, A-flat major, and the Polonaise-Fantasy in A-flat minor), the Preludes, and the Scherzi. Quick to find the equivalents between creators in different arts, Huneker compares Chopin with Poe. For him they both were

[e]xquisite artificers in precious cameos . . . of a consanguinity because of their devotion to Our Ladies of Sorrow, the Mater Lachrymarum, the Mater Suspiriorum and the Mater Tenebrarum of Thomas de Quincey. If the Mater Malorum—Mother of Evil—presided over their lives, they never in their art became as Baudelaire, a sinister "Israfel of the sweet lute." Whatever their personal shortcomings, the disorders of their lives found no reflex beyond that of melancholy.

If Huneker loves Chopin, he only likes Liszt. Somewhere he sees Liszt as a moun-

tebank both spiritual and musical. Even when describing the B-minor Sonata, the Liszt piano work he most admires, he cannot help remarking on the composer's insincerity. This insincerity is shown in the appearance of "the sigh of sentiment, of passion, of abandonment which engenders the notion that when Liszt was not kneeling before a crucifix, he was before a woman." Huneker is fascinated by Liszt's path-breaking Transcendental Etudes and Concert Etudes, but it is significant that he ends his *Mezzotints* chapter on etudes for the piano by advising pianists to "play the Chopin études, daily, also the preludes, for the rest trust to God and Bach. Bach is the bread of the pianist's life; always play him that your musical days may be long in the land."

Finally, of course, there is Wagner. Huneker is at great pains to separate the composer from his literary utterances:

Keep in your mind that Wagner the artist was a greater man than Wagner the vegetarian, Wagner the anti-vivisectionist, Wagner the revolutionist, the Jew hater, the foe of Meyerbeer and Mendelssohn, and greater than Wagner the philosopher.

Huneker finds Wagner "a poet of passion," though he does not admire the composer's librettos. In a mixed tribute to the composer, Huneker closes *Mezzotints* with a kind of surrender: "We are the slaves of our age, and we adore Wagner because he moves us, thrills and thralls us. His may not be the most spiritual art, but it is the most completely fascinating."

Huneker's second book is devoted to Chopin. Called *Chopin: The Man and His Music*, the book, published in 1900, attempts to serve as biography, study of the composer's psychology, and a brief description of each piece in his oeuvre. What Huneker achieves in this book is not scholarship, reasoned consideration of his idol, or even a real book; rather he is here the piano *aficionado*, the worshiper at the sacred fount of the keyboard. For him, the Etudes are

"Titanic Experiments"; the Preludes are "Moods in Miniature"; the Nocturnes describe "Night and its Melancholy Mysteries"; the Ballades are "Faëry Dramas"; the Polonaises are "Heroic Hymns of Battle"; the Mazurkas are "Dances of the Soul"; the Scherzi are "Chopin the Conqueror." The end of the book is a tribute to the immortality of art and the artist, thrown into the void of the future:

He did not always succeed, but his victories are the precious prizes of mankind. One is loath to believe that the echo of Chopin's magic music can ever fall upon unheeding ears. He may become old-fashioned, but, like Mozart, he will remain eternally beautiful.

Huneker's two books of short fiction, the 1902 *Melomaniacs* and the 1905 *Visionaries*, convey by their titles something of the overheated, extravagant, and bizarre atmosphere of the stories they contain. The most significant influence on Huneker's style—in addition to Poe—was Joris Karl Huysmans, whose 1884 novel *A rebours* still seems a century later the most important example of *l'esprit décadent*. To the classic symbolist—and later decadent—brew of voluptuousness, febrile nervousity, indulgence in drugs and alcohol, obsessive seeking after sensation, and Satanism, Huneker adds the triumph of music as queen of the arts by putting in melomania—a crazed involvement in music whereby the art of tone becomes an all-consuming, destructive passion.

In these forty-four stories (several more are scattered through the books of essays), Huneker presents an asylum gallery of artists, along with the trapped members of their families. His protagonists are varied, though curiously repetitious. A composer creates a music so emotionally powerful that its performance in Paris causes a conflagration that destroys the city. A pianist, now surviving by playing in a cheap restaurant, tells of his drunken and botched debut, caused by his awareness the evening before that his coming failure would kill his parents. A soothsayer creates a new art—the

eighth deadly sin—out of perfumes. A mad Russian scientist uses fireworks to make a world-conquering beauty, but the fireworks get out of control and kill the watching thousands. An Irish priest is taken to a Greek Orthodox baby who turns out to be the Antichrist; by baptizing the child the priest destroys the creature's spell. Perched between the mock-serious and the dead-serious, these stories now seem too artificial to compel attention, but in their day they must have caused many a maiden—and bachelor too, for that matter—to shiver. Again, they testify to the gathering strength of art as a religious mania. Despite their slight value as literature, Huneker's stories do make clear an important change in turn-of-the-century opinion about the significance of music and the other arts: from merely expressing tragedy, they have progressed to causing it.

Increasingly, the word "anarch" becomes central for Huneker, who lays stress upon the idea of the great artistic creator as totally self-governing. Thus *Overtones*, his 1904 collection of essays, is dedicated to Strauss, whom Huneker calls in the dedication "An Anarch of Art." Strauss's overlordship is shown in his "cold, astringent voluptuousness." Huneker goes on to write:

He himself may be a Merlin,—all great composers are ogres in their insatiable love of power,—but he has rescued us from the romantic theatric blight; and a change of dynasty is always welcome to slaves of the musical habit.

Once again it is curious that in the foregoing quotation Huneker rejects Wagner's unification of the arts in favor of that expression in music alone for which he admired Brahms, and for which he now credits Strauss. This quotation is of interest too for its comfortable Nietzschean division of the world into master and slaves—in this case the master who composes and the slaves who have the musical habit.

It is no surprise when, in *Overtones*, Huneker goes on to reject Wagner's *Parsifal* as absolute music and to find in the opera a

“lack of absolute sincerity . . . the work of a man who had outlived his genius.” In this judgment of *Parsifal*, Huneker is only walking in the footsteps of Nietzsche, who followed a period of Wagner idolatry with the most vitriolic rejection of *Der Meister* on record. In Nietzsche’s condemnation of Wagner’s causing music to be taken over by the drama, Huneker finds corroboration for his own conviction that “music pure and simple, for itself, undefiled by costumes, scenery, limelights, and vocal virtuosi, is the noblest music of all.”

Elsewhere in *Overtones* Huneker scorns Mendelssohn as a writer of “Bach watered for general consumption.” Continuing the fight of the Nineties over Max Nordau’s *Degeneration*—a rejection of modern art (and artists) as depraved—he asserts that “there are no sane men of genius.” He rejects Verdi’s music written before *Aida* as brainless, though promising and potent—but he praises *Falstaff* to the skies. He admires Debussy’s new *Pelléas et Mélisande*, though without finding it successful as absolute music. He ends with a plea for “intellectual music” without “metaphysical meanings,” and his proffered model is Mozart’s G-minor Symphony: “in its sunny measures is sanity.”

Neither the 1905 *Iconoclasts* nor the 1909 *Egoists* deals with music at all. *Iconoclasts* is concerned with the contemporary European dramatists—first among them Ibsen—and in particular with plays containing a social message. Because my main concern here is with Huneker as a music critic, it is perhaps only necessary to remark that in his fulsome praise for Ibsen he seems to have one standard, that of realism, for drama, and another, that of beauty, for music:

Love me, love my truth, the playwright says in effect; and we are forced to make a wry face as we swallow the nauseous and unsugared pill he forces down our sentimental gullets.

Egoists carries the subtitle “A Book of Supermen,” and is chiefly interesting for its articles on nineteenth-century French writ-

ers, including Stendhal, Baudelaire, Flaubert, Anatole France, Huysmans, and Maurice Barrès—in addition to Nietzsche and Stirner. The book treats these disparate creatures as supreme individualists, and though it gives them high praise for their ability to follow their own way, Huneker seems to be making an attempt to gain rational control of an artistic movement all too easily allowed to luxuriate, as it had in his own short fiction, in its own willfulness. Thus, in the essay on Baudelaire, he attacks the idea that artists are dissipated creatures:

What the majority of mankind does not know concerning the habits of literary workers is this prime fact: men who work hard, writing verse—and there is no mental toil comparable to it—cannot drink, or indulge in opium, without the inevitable collapse. The old-fashioned ideas of “inspiration,” spontaneity, easy improvisation, the sudden bolt from heaven, are delusions still hugged by the world. To be told that Chopin filed at his music for years, that Beethoven in his smithy forged his thunderbolts, that Manet toiled like a labourer on the dock . . . is a disillusion for the sentimental.

And with Nietzsche, too, Huneker, if not actually changing his opinion on the philosopher’s stature as a superman and an “anarch,” seems to qualify his position:

No longer is he a bogey man, not a creature of blood and iron, not a constructive or an academic philosopher, but simply a brilliant and suggestive thinker who, because of the nature of his genius, could never have erected an elaborate philosophic system, and a writer not quite as dangerous to established religion and morals as some critics would have us believe.

The 1910 *Promenades of an Impressionist* is concerned with painting. The use of “impressionist” in the title does not refer to the painters of that school but to Huneker’s characteristic device of critical impressionism, the recording of his reactions and feelings as aroused by the art he was considering. The book opens with a discussion of the

post-Impressionist Cézanne, whom Huneker respects but cannot warm up to. As would happen when he came to face the new music of Arnold Schoenberg, Huneker is careful to make the distinction between truth and beauty:

Stubborn, with an instinctive hatred of academic poses, of the atmosphere of the studio, of the hired model, of "literary," or mere digital cleverness, Cézanne has dropped out of his scheme harmony, melody, beauty—classic, romantic, symbolic, what you will!—and doggedly represented the ugliness of things. But there is a brutal strength, a tang of the soil that is bitter, and also strangely invigorating, after the false, perfumed boudoir art of so many of his contemporaries.

In *Promenades*, Huneker gives a sign that, as the appreciator of the new, he is increasingly conscious that a critic can in his life represent only one moment of artistic revolution, and that the critic's role too will be superseded. Thus, he compares Cézanne's still lifes to those of the eighteenth-century painter Chardin:

Chardin interprets still-life with realistic beauty; if he had ever painted an onion it would have revealed a certain grace. When Paul Cézanne paints an onion, you smell it. Nevertheless, he has captured the affections of the rebels and is their god. And next season it may be someone else.

Huneker's lurking rejection of the new in art becomes clear when he writes of Frans Hals: "How thin and insubstantial modern painting is if compared to this magician . . ."

From this point on, it is difficult not to feel that, with one glorious exception at the very end of his life, Huneker's remaining books mark a downward curve. The 1911 *Franz Liszt* is a congeries of quotations from contemporaries of the composer and lists of his pupils and descriptions of their playing. Despite praise for Liszt's emancipation of instrumental music through his contributions to the symphonic poem, much of the

book is merely a hymn to the piano, Liszt's graceful contribution to which, Huneker realizes, "will die hard, yet die it will." Of Liszt's arrangements and paraphrases, Huneker writes: "One may show off with them, make much noise and a reputation for virtuosity, that would be quickly shattered if a Bach fugue were selected as a text."

The very title of the 1913 *Pathos of Distance*, taken from Nietzsche, admirably conveys the tone of retrospection which will now increasingly characterize Huneker's writing, and marks, along with the consideration of Schoenberg two years later in *Ivory Apes and Peacocks*, the limits of Huneker's wholehearted acceptance of the new. In *The Pathos of Distance*, Huneker admires post-Impressionism, but without paying it the ultimate honor:

Rhythmic intensity is the key to the new school; line, not colour is king. Not beauty, but, as Rodin said, character, character is the aim of the new art.

While Huneker could find room in his pantheon for Cézanne, Gauguin, Van Gogh, and Matisse, he could find no such place for the Cubists:

The catalogue of the Tenth Autumn Salon [Paris, 1912] shows . . . few masterpieces, much sterile posing in paint, any quantity of mediocre talent, and in several salles devoted to the Cubists and others of the ilk any amount of mystification, charlatanry, and an occasional glimpse of individuality. I am in sympathy with revolutionary movements in art, but now I know that my sympathies have reached their outermost verge.

In the 1915 *Ivory Apes and Peacocks* Huneker seems willing to accept the music of Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* as something the future may embrace, though it is plain that his tolerance of it owes entirely to the demands of reason and not to love:

I fear and dislike the music of Arnold Schoenberg . . . the aura of Arnold Schoenberg is,

for me, the aura of subtle ugliness, of hatred and contempt, of cruelty, and of the mystic grandiose. He is never petty. He sins in the grand manner of Nietzsche's Superman, and he has the courage of his chromatics. If such music-making is ever to become accepted, then I long for Death the Releaser. More shocking still would be the suspicion that in time I might be persuaded to like this music, to embrace, after abhorring it . . . I have been informed that the ear should play a secondary role in this "new" music; no longer through the porches of the ear must filter plangent tones, wooing the tympanum with ravishing accords. It is now the "inner ear," which is symbolic of a higher type of musical art. A complete dissociation of ideas, harmonies, rhythmic life, architectonic is demanded. To quote an admirer of the Vienna revolutionist: "The entire man in you must be made over before you can divine Schoenberg's art" . . . Cheer up, brethren! Preserve an open mind. It is too soon to beat reactionary bosoms, crying aloud, Nunc dimittis! Remember the monstrous fuss made over the methods of Richard Strauss and Claude Debussy. I shouldn't be surprised if ten years hence Arnold Schoenberg proves quite as conventional a member of musical society as those two other "anarchs of art."

Unfortunately, this laudable optimism that a new generation will make up its mind favorably about currently problematic art rings false in the light of Huneker's own unwillingness to praise any new music as he had praised the new music of his youth. The new music was not what he loved; he did not love Stravinsky, Kodály, and Bartok, of whom Huneker can say no more than that they "are not to be slighted." Even more clearly, his beloved music was not that of Prokofiev: Huneker, though he later was to find some of the composer's miniature piano pieces "piquant," in a 1918 review (quoted in the Arnold Schwab biography) thought his music "volitional and essentially cold," marked by "intrinsic poverty of ideas," and written by a "psychologist of the uglier emotions—hate, contempt, rage—above all,

rage—disgust, despair, mockery, and defiance." Even in the case of his once-adored Richard Strauss, Huneker is unable to go beyond *Salome*, *Elektra*, and *Der Rosenkavalier*. *Ariadne auf Naxos*, the premiere of which in the original Max Reinhardt version he attended in Stuttgart in 1912, he found a misfire, and for the probable success of Strauss in the future he is forced to fall back upon the composer's undoubted success in the past.

Though in *Ivory Apes and Peacocks* and the subsequent 1917 *Unicorns* Huneker is still capable of praise for new literature—he admires Conrad, Wedekind, the now forgotten Russian novelist Michael Artzibashev, and Joyce—his musical world seems to have closed in. He has nothing to say in his books about any American composer save Edward MacDowell, and only in the case of a few performers—the pianists Godowsky and Vladimir de Pachmann, and the singer Mary Garden—can he manage something like the old enthusiasm.

Indeed, what I have earlier called Huneker's increasing mood of retrospection comes to a climax in his last book, the posthumously printed *Variations*, which appeared in 1921. In a chapter entitled "A Mood Reactionary," presciently anticipating today's sophisticated musical opinion, Huneker writes in his own name what he had only written before as a spoof under the pseudonym of "Old Fogy":

Berlioz, Tchaikowsky and R. Strauss are not for all time.

The truth is that musical art has gone far afield from the main travelled road, has been led into blind alleys and dark forests . . . [W]ho has "improved" on Bach, Handel, Haydn, Mozart, Gluck, Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, Chopin? Name, name, I ask. What's the use of talking about the "higher average of today?" How much higher? You mean that more people go to concerts, more people enjoy music, than fifty years or a hundred years ago. Do they? I doubt it. Of what use all our huge temples of worship if the true gods of art no longer be worshipped therein?

Numbers prove nothing The multiplication of orchestras, opera-houses, singing-societies, and concerts are not indicative that general culture is achieved. Quality, not quantity, should be the shibboleth. The tradition of the classics is fading, soon it shall vanish. We care little for the masters. Modern music worship is a fashionable fad. People go to listen because they think it is the mode. Alack and alas! that is not the true spirit in which to approach the Holy of Holies, Bach, Handel, Mozart, and Beethoven. Oremus!

And lest the words I have just quoted be taken as no more than the passing mood of a prolific writer, the final words of *Variations*, in all their simplicity, convey all too well the mood of Huneker's musical last will and testament:

A good comrade, a loving husband and father, the giant tenor of his generation, Enrico Caruso is dead. But to his admirers, he remains the dearest memory in this drab, prosaic age.

Two books more of James Huneker remain to be considered: *Steeplejack*, the memoirs which appeared in book form in 1920 after their newspaper publication two years earlier, and *Painted Veils*, his 1920 novel. *Steeplejack* is a charming book, full of reminiscences and amplified gleanings from previously published material. The anecdotes it contains are wonderful, and one of them at least deserves immortality:

I made Monsignor laugh [on a visit to the Vatican in 1905] when I retailed that venerable tale about Liszt's repentance and withdrawal from the world to the Oratory of the Madonna del Rosario on Monte Mario, an hour from Rome. Pope Pio Nono conferred upon the Magyar pianist the singular honor of personally hearing his confession and receiving the celebrated sinner into the arms of Mother Church. (Perhaps the delightful old Pope was curious.) After the first day and night, Liszt was still on his knees, muttering into the exhausted ears of the unhappy Pontiff

the awful history of his life and loves. Then, extenuated, Pio Nono begged his penitent: "Basta! Caro Liszt. Your memory is marvelous. Now go to the piano and play there the remainder of your sins."

But even more important than *Steeplejack's* anecdotes are the revelations it contains about his own approach to work as a critic. In an attack upon Swinburne's statement that the chief attraction of the profession of criticism should be the possibility of giving noble praise, Huneker points out that the poet "had the most vitriolic pen in England," and then goes on to remark:

. . . neither praise nor blame should be the goal of the critic. To spill his own soul, that should be his aim. Notwithstanding the talk about objective criticism, no such abstraction is thinkable. A critic relates his prejudices, nothing more. It is well to possess prejudices. They lend to life a meaning.

But Huneker's mature thoughts on criticism are concerned with more than his own individual impressionist style. He knows too, and marvelously expresses, the universal truth that a critic is at the mercy of the artistic quality of that about which he writes:

I was slowly discovering that to become successful, a critic can't wait for masterpieces, but must coddle mediocrity. Otherwise, an idle pen. Big talents are rare, so you must, to hold your job, praise conventional patterns. And that way leads to the stifling of critical values.

Huneker's novel, *Painted Veils*, begins with a *fin de siècle* epigraph, redolent of the diabolism with which Huneker had played for so many years:

Now the Seven Deadly Virtues are: Humility, Charity, Meekness, Temperance, Brotherly Love, Diligence, Chastity. And the Seven Deadly Arts are: Poetry, Music, Architecture, Painting, Sculpture, Drama, Dancing.

The novel tells the story of an American opera singer, greatly gifted in voice and ambition, and a rich American expatriate. The opera singer, meant to suggest Istar, the Assyrian goddess of love, knowing nothing of virtue, chooses the deadly art of music and lets nothing human or divine stand in the way of her career. The American expatriate, her lover and a sometime music critic whose life in many ways parallels Huneker's, knows the good, but allows himself to be the cause of the ruin of others. The opera singer, after a lifetime of sexual license, remains "the greatest Isolde since Lilli Lehmann . . . Istar, the Great Singing Whore of Modern Babylon." Her American lover dies in Paris in the final stages of syphilis. Long after the novel's many bawdy incidents have been forgotten, the reader retains a strong and moving impression that for Huneker, as for so many Catholics on the Continent, art has been the other, and reverse, face of God. In this, his last book published during his lifetime, Huneker returned, in symbolic expression if not in actual observance, to the devout Catholicism of his family.

As this consideration of James Huneker comes to its end, the real nature of his contribution to the cultural taste of his America, and to the cultural taste of our America, becomes clear. There can be no doubt that he was a vivid and effective messenger, not just for the various arts of the 1890s but in a wider sense for the European gospel of art and aestheticism. Whatever may have been his contribution to the advancement of American taste in literature and drama, it seems that in the visual arts he recoiled personally from the implications of much of the new painting from post-Impressionism onward. The fact that in the service of the gospel of the new he felt it necessary to praise that which he could not love suggests an earlier origin for today's spurious doctrine of the artistic "cutting edge." It also suggests the importance of Huneker's role, and that of his historical reputation, in fostering that doctrine.

In the case of music, his recoil from the avant-garde very likely returned him to a taste that went little further than Chopin. In this he functioned not to bring American opinion over to the side of the new music of the Eighties and Nineties, which in any case had achieved wide popularity on its own by the coming of the twentieth century, but rather to solidify that antecedent worship of the classic German composers and Chopin which to this day marks the orientation of cultivated music lovers.

A word is in order, too, about Huneker's literary achievement. Unlike his music-critic colleagues (and friends) H.E. Krehbiel, Richard Aldrich, and Lawrence Gilman, Huneker was an exciting writer. In this day of the increasing penetration of criticism—especially music criticism—by the academy, Huneker's work strikes me as possessing, and conveying, the golden value of artistic involvement. In the best sense, his style was always oriented to action, leading the reader toward ever more vital thought about and experience of art.

It must not be forgotten that James Huneker began his critical career as a musician and pianist, and a musician and a pianist he remained to the end of his life. When Mencken's philistine-bashing boosterism of Huneker's contribution to advanced taste in America is properly forgotten, I hope that I at least, in tribute to my childish hours of attention to Huneker while sitting at the piano, will remember his words from the closing paragraph of *Steeplejack*:

I can't play cards or billiards. I can't read day and night. I take no interest in the chess-board of politics, and I am not too pious. What shall I do? Music, always music! There are certain compositions by Chopin to master which eternity itself would not be too long . . . I once more place the notes on the piano desk . . . How many years have I not played that magic music? Music the flying vision . . . music that merges with the tender air . . . its image melts in shy misty shadows . . . the cloud, the cloud, the singing, shining cloud . . . over the skies and far away . . . the beckoning cloud . . .

George Santayana and the consolations of philosophy

by Joseph Epstein

Philosophers, unlike fish, do best not to travel in schools. Josiah Royce once said that the philosopher does well to imitate the rhinoceros, who travels in a herd of one. George Santayana, a rhinoceros among philosophers, an all-ivory and very elegant one, went even further in stipulating that the philosopher ought not to share unreservedly the spirit of his age, or be subject to its dominant moods. One of Santayana's criticisms of Bertrand Russell was that "he could never shake himself free from his environment and from the miscellaneous currents of opinion in his day." Insofar as philosophy implies the long view and the high view—and insofar as it does not, philosophy is a great deal less interesting—this would seem to make good sense. If the world is among those phenomena that are not better understood close up, then philosophers should indeed cultivate detachment the way English pensioners do delphiniums: for motives above and beyond immediate profit. But is the world best understood from the distance, away from the fray and above the ruck? That, as a certain notable Danish prince was wont to say, is the question.

It was never much of a question for George Santayana, who, in suggesting that the philosopher ought not to live too fully in the spirit of his age, might have been writing his own job description. Not that Santayana had to cultivate detachment; he seems to have been born with it, the way other people are born with, say, large feet. This quality of

extreme detachment in Santayana has put many people off, in our own time and even more in his. He referred to his own "essential character as a traveller and a stranger, with the philosophical freedom that this implies." He felt that to be a stranger was his destiny and considered himself among those true travellers who, not "pining for a better cage," are content with their own condition of permanent transience. Nowhere in Santayana's writings will one find the least yearning to be amidst the fray or in and around the ruck. He was quite content to occupy his seat in the shade, a glass of good wine in his hand, watching the other people dance.

When Santayana remarked that being a stranger was his destiny, he could only have been alluding to the conditions of his birth and upbringing. He was the only child of his mother's second marriage, and was named after her first husband. His mother had earlier married the ninth child of the Boston merchant Nathaniel Russell Sturgis, with whom she had five children, three of whom survived. She had met her second husband, George's father, when he and her own father were officials in the Spanish civil service in the Philippine Islands, but did not marry him until many years later. In 1869, when George was six years old, his mother parted from him and his father to live in Boston among her deceased first husband's family, who were her main financial stay. Young George was left behind in the walled Span-

ish city of Avila with his father, who was then in his fifties. Three years later, along with his father, he joined his mother in Boston, to take his place as the youngest son in a shabby-genteel household with a remote connection to the wealthy and well-established Sturgises. When George's father found that he was too old to make the adjustment to life in the United States, he returned to Avila. His son would not see him again until he was at the end of his freshman year at Harvard.

Santayana did not have to worry about his mother's love; from nearly the outset, he knew he didn't have it. Such maternal love as she seemed to possess spent itself upon her first-born son, Victor, who died in the second year of his life. The death "made a radical revolution in her heart," Santayana would note years later in his autobiography, *Persons and Places*.¹ "It established there a reign of silent despair, permanent, devastating, ruffled perhaps by fresh events on the surface, but always dark and heavy beneath, like the depths of the sea." He would claim that his half-sister Susana, who was twelve years his senior, came closer to being his true mother. He frankly wondered what his parents saw in each other. As for him, he loved his father, whom he could not admire, and admired his mother, whom he could not love. Two interesting cards to be dealt so early in life.

Santayana's manner in writing about his mother in *Persons and Places* is characteristic of his detachment. It is evenhanded but not cool; it is hot, but not red hot. He ticks off her many and serious shortcomings: her coldness; her incuriosity, not to say philistinism; her pridefulness; her hostility to everything that interested her children; her mismanagement of the lives of those chil-

dren who would permit her any control over their lives. Santayana, pretty clearly, was not among the latter. He wasn't because in many respects he and his mother were very much alike: in their independence of will; in their need to separate themselves from those around them; in their common inability to be much moved by the most tragic of events; and in their fundamental despair, which seemed to raise them both above great concern over ordinary matters. One may not like a man who tells you straightaway that he is a cold fish, but one tends to trust him.

If few of the conventional comforts of family life were open to Santayana, those of patriotism were even more closed off to him. Born in Spain and raised in the United States, he was truly neither American nor Spanish, though legally he remained and died a Spanish citizen. When he first returned to Spain, in 1883, in his twentieth year, he felt like a foreigner there "and could not do myself justice in the language." Language was no barrier to him in America—he spoke English with no marked accent—but he felt even more of a foreigner here. He would later say that in feeling he was Spanish and that in mastering English he might be said "to have been guilty, quite unintentionally, of a little stratagem, as if I had set out to say plausibly in English as many un-English things as possible."

Almost by design, Santayana appears to have been a foreigner in every country in which he ever lived. In Spain, Santayana never sought out fellow Americans; in America he never sought the company of fellow Spaniards. Although he spent many a season living in Paris, the episodic and fashionable nature of French intellectual and artistic life put him off; so did the French mind, which he cited as "an exquisite medium for conveying such things as can be communicated in words. It is the unspoken things of which one feels the absence or mistrusts the quality [among the French]." He thought about settling in England after he had given up teaching philosophy at Harvard in 1912, which was as early as he could afford to do so. ("True serenity of mind

1 *Persons and Places*, by George Santayana, was originally published in three volumes: *Persons and Places* (1944), *The Middle Span* (1945), and *My Host the World* (1953). MIT Press has recently published a handsome critical edition, edited by William G. Holzberger and Herman J. Saatkamp, Jr., with an introduction by Richard C. Lyon (761 pages, \$35).

comes, of course,” as Murray Kempton once remarked, “to those who can dismiss Harvard.”) But he decided, while living there during World War I, that he “was in danger of losing my philosophical *cruelty* and independence” (*italics mine*), and so departed once more, describing his farewell to England as akin to burying “a wife long divorced.”

George Santayana was unassimilable by nature, a stranger by preference, a man without a country quite as much by choice as by circumstance. When in his sixties he finally settled in Rome, he did so not because he felt he had found an ideal society, but rather because he found suitable lodgings in an ideal situation of solitude and independence, “after the fashion of ancient philosophers,” as he put it, “often in exile, but always in sight of the market-place and the theatre.” Of course, to be in exile one must first have a home country from which one has been ejected or has chosen to flee. As John McCormick writes in his excellent new biography of Santayana,² “Wherever he was, he was at ease, playing his part on the stage, but he was not at home.” Yet it would be a mistake, I believe, to imagine George Santayana as lonely, alienated, an *isolato*—a mistake, in general, to imagine that Santayana did not enjoy life, for he did, immensely.

How was Santayana able to do so without the consolations the rest of us require: love of family, of country, of friends? Consider only friendship. Santayana’s friendships were sometimes intense but scarcely ever intimate. In regard to friends, he resembled a cousin of his father’s, who “liked all that was likable, without being deceived by it.” Such friendships as Santayana made as a young man were based not on social class, for his own was a bit blurry, or on membership in the same circle, for he belonged to no circle, but instead on his own two prerequisites to perfect friendship—“capacity to laugh and capacity to worship.” Yet, he felt, at least

from the perspective of old age, that “modern life is not made for friendship,” offering as it did too many distractions. The friend who seems to have meant the most to Santayana was Frank Russell, the 2nd Earl Russell and Bertrand Russell’s older, equally scandal-prone brother; the long duration of their friendship, Santayana believed, was owing to the fact that “neither of us was ever a nuisance to the other.” But this friendship, like almost all his others, would in time lapse. As he grew older, Santayana accustomed himself to lapsed friendships without bitterness. In a world where everything was transitory, friends could scarcely be otherwise, but for him this “involved no estrangement, no disillusion; on the contrary, the limits of each friendship perfected that friendship, insured it against disaster, enshrined it in the eternal.” To live *sub species aeternitatis*, under the aspect of eternity, is of course the way philosophers are supposed to live. Yet to come across a philosopher who actually does so live is startling and not a little spooky, and we tend to be chilled by it.

Of marriage, the ultimate friendship, that, for Santayana, was never a serious possibility. At twenty-two, studying in Germany on a Walker Fellowship from Harvard, he wrote in light verse to his friend Ward Thoron:

I cannot part from what I prize
For all I prize is in my head;
My fancies are the fields and skies
I will not change till I am dead,
Unless indeed I lose my wits
Or (what is much the same thing) wed.

Years later, now a professor at Harvard, when asked why he didn’t marry, he replied that he wished to retain his freedom and, besides, he did not intend always to live in America. He also mentioned religious difficulties, for he styled himself a “free-thinking Catholic” (about which more presently), which left him in a socially impossible position in a Protestant country. He counted himself a *déraciné*, and, as he wrote in his autobiography, “a *déraciné*, a man who has

2 *George Santayana: A Biography*, by John McCormick; Alfred A. Knopf, 612 pages, \$30.

been torn up by the roots, cannot be replanted and should never propagate his kind."

Skeptical minds will want to know if all this isn't the sheerest twaddle and if Santayana was not in fact homosexual. It is a question worthy of Barbara Walters, but today, alas, all biographers must ask it of their unmarried subjects, or even of those who have married too often. John McCormick, who does little poking about in sexual closets in his biography, nonetheless feels that he must flop one way or another on the question, and he flops, on a very thin mattress of epistolary evidence, which is too thin to air out here, on the side that says Santayana must have been homosexual. Although I much admire Professor McCormick's biography, and although his brief sexual investigation does not in any serious way flaw his book, I wish he hadn't flopped at all.

I think a much stronger case can be made for the other side. In a letter to Morton Fullerton, who was later to be Edith Wharton's lover and a friend to Henry James, Santayana sets out the sexual choices, but eliminates "Paiderastia" because "our prejudices against it are so strong that it hardly comes under the possibilities for us." While he writes elsewhere in good Santayanan metaphor that "the chained dogs below keep barking in their kennels," he also avers that "love has never made me long unhappy, nor sexual impulse uncomfortable." But what seems to be clinching is his critical treatment of the dons at King's College, Cambridge—"my feeling when I was at King's was that the birds were not worthy of the cage"—during a time when the homosexual spirit was very much in the ascendant at that college. Santayana found E.M. Forster's friend and philosophical mentor, Lowes Dickinson, hopeless in his utopianly sentimental moralizing. Oscar Browning "openly flaunted the banners of gluttony and paederasty, neither of them suitable for a teacher of youth . . ." Of Lytton Strachey, another great Cambridge figure of this era, Santayana wrote: "*Obscene* was the character

written all over him; and his expertness in secret history in satire expressed that character intellectually." To a correspondent who queried him many years later about Strachey, he replied: "No, I am *not* an admirer of Strachey. I knew him." Such sentiments scarcely seem those of a man, to adopt Professor McCormick's unfortunate phrase, of "homosexual temperament."

Very little else about Professor McCormick's biography is unfortunate. It is well written; it is comprehensive; it is devoid of nonsense. *George Santayana: A Biography* is a difficult biographical assignment brilliantly brought off. Of its difficulty, consider only the following: Santayana lived a long life (he died at eighty-eight) in which almost all the major events went on in his mind; *déraciné* by birth and as far from *engagé* as possible in his intellectual life, only his views, ideas, books matter. In *Persons and Places*, Santayana wrote one of the really splendid autobiographies of the twentieth century, and few things can be quite so discouraging to a biographer as his subject's having written well and truly about himself. One of those things may be to have this same subject also be among a small circle of extremely elegant English prose stylists, so that, next to his subject's, the biographer's own writing will often be made to seem rather dim, not to say a bit shoddy. (Careful readers will notice that thus far along in this essay I have refrained from quoting Santayana at length.)

In the nature of this case, a biographer does not figure to be as subtle, penetrating, or artful as his subject. But he ought not to be too much less so. A biographer who can write about a subject whose mind is as well-stocked and intellectually intricate as Santayana's is not easily found. To understand Santayana, one has to be interested in art and philosophy, and to appreciate philosophy practiced as an art, which is the way he, Santayana, usually practiced it. John McCormick, who is not a professional philosopher but a teacher of comparative literature who has written on literary history and on the theoretical foundations of fiction, does

understand all this. He is a worldly man, and a serious man, who writes lucidly, with power where it is called for, and with occasional enlivening flashes of wit, such as when, in passing, he remarks that old age is a reliable cure for hypochondria, or when he says of Santayana and Ezra Pound, "their difference in age was considerable; their difference in temperament was alarming." McCormick's treatment of Santayana is even-handed; his general tone is one of appreciation not bereft of criticism. Unless one is wholly an aesthete, Santayana is not a writer one loves—Lionel Trilling, writing about Santayana's letters in the middle 1950s, noted that "indeed, it might be remarkably easy to dislike him"—but at the same time it is difficult not to feel fascinated admiration for him, so copious was his talent, so completely did he live his philosophy.

In his thirtieth year, in a letter to Norman Hapgood, Santayana wrote: "It becomes clearer to me every day that both in teaching and living our need is simplification, measure and docility to the facts." Of course his own needs were immensely simplified by his early understanding that he was among those with "no other purpose but that of living to observe life," which is to say, that he was a writer. Whatever his other deficiencies, he had, *in excelsis*, "the faculty of intellectual delight," which he never lost. On a travelling fellowship in Germany he wrote to his teacher William James that "philosophy seems to me to be its own reward, and its justification lies in the delight and dignity of the art itself"; and he later confessed to James that what initially drew him to philosophy was "curiosity and a natural taste for ingenious thinking." All this makes him sound very much the cool aesthete, for whom philosophy is above all a superior game. And so it might have been but for his talent for facing unpleasant facts, the least pleasant of which he knew by the time he was twenty-three, and perhaps much earlier—that "the world isn't run in our interest or with any reference to our needs." He calls this brute fact the "ultimate lesson of expe-

rience and philosophy," and by "our" he doesn't mean dreamy young men at Harvard but all human beings.

That the world was not organized in the interest of human beings, nor had any special reference to their needs, was the last thing Santayana was likely to have learned at Harvard, where a Protestant spirit of uplift prevailed. This spirit, it does not seem too strong to say, Santayana detested. It was akin to the spirit he found in the Unitarian churches of Boston, where people flocked "to hear a sermon like the leading article in some superior newspaper calculated to confirm the conviction already in them that their bourgeois virtues were quite sufficient and that perhaps in time poor backward races and nations might be led to acquire them." He considered the great New England god Emerson "a sort of Puritan Goethe," who had "slipped into transcendentalism and moralism and complacency in mediocrity, in order to flatter his countrymen and indirectly flatter himself." One of Santayana's many complaints against Harvard's President Charles W. Eliot (who brought the system of elective courses to the university) was that he, Eliot, thought that if a thing was moral it must also be true.

Santayana detected and ultimately condemned this spirit in the philosophy department at Harvard—a department that included William James, Josiah Royce, and, between the years 1889 and 1912, Santayana himself. "Protestant philosophy," as he called philosophy in America in *Character and Opinion in the United States* (1920), "was too conscientious to misrepresent what it found," but also too moral-minded not to undermine its findings. At Harvard, philosophers felt themselves bound "by two different responsibilities, that of describing things as they are, and that of finding them propitious to certain preconceived human desires." Josiah Royce, who loved logic, labored with a powerful contradiction at the heart of his work, adducing the existence of evil to prove the existence of good, and then feeling he ought to strive to eliminate evil. Not even William James, according to San-

tayana, could shake off the heavy hand of Protestant moralizing: "He was worried about what *ought* to be believed and the awful deprivation of disbelieving."

Santayana has the distinction of being one of the few people to speak ill of William James with a pretty fair consistency. The feeling was not reciprocated, even though James is famously known, in a letter to George H. Palmer, his colleague in the Harvard philosophy department, to have referred to Santayana's "perfection of rottenness in a philosophy" and to his "moribund Latinity." As Professor McCormick shows, these phrases were embedded in a letter of otherwise exuberant praise for Santayana's book *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* (1900), about which James wrote: "Although I absolutely reject the platonism of it, I have literally squealed with delight at the imperturbable perfection with which the position is laid down on page after page; and grunted with delight at the thickening up of our Harvard atmosphere . . ."

It is reasonably certain that Santayana never either squealed or grunted with delight at anything William James wrote. James was in no serious sense Santayana's mentor, but he was, within the Harvard philosophy department, his protector, helping to arrange a job for him, solidifying a permanent position, aiding in his promotion.³ Santayana may not have known this. Yet even had he known it, my guess is that he could not quite have let his disappointment in James be. In a letter to a Harvard colleague, after reporting that John Stuart Mill's psychologism repels him, he goes on to say, "Mill is a sort of ponderous and sober James." To the same man he earlier writes, "I love W. James as a man. But what a singularly bad thinker he is!" Yet if he claimed to love him in a letter of 1904, when he came to write about him decades later in *Persons and Places* he noted:

3 See in this connection William James, *Selected Unpublished Correspondence 1885-1910*, edited by Frederick J. Down Scott (Ohio State University Press, 603 pages, \$45).

I was uncomfortable in his presence. He was so extremely natural that there was no knowing what his nature was, or what to expect next; so that one was driven to behave and talk conventionally, as in the most artificial society. I found no foothold, I was soon fatigued, and it was a relief to be out again in the open, and alone.

In *Character and Opinion in the United States*, Santayana really lowered the boom on James—a velvet-covered boom, to be sure, but one that could nonetheless knock off a man's head. There Santayana writes that James was a spirited but not a spiritual man; that *The Varieties of Religious Experience* is a book that altogether overlooks the religious experience of the great mass of mankind, which "consists in simple faith in the truth and benefit of their religious traditions"; that James was chary of coming to philosophical conclusions, or, as Santayana put it, "liked to take things one by one, rather than to put two and two together"; and that, finally, "there is a sense in which James was not a philosopher at all."

Heavy praise was not part of the regular regimen of Santayana's intellectual exercise—the only thinkers who unwaveringly find favor with him are the Greeks, Lucretius, and, after a jump of seventeen centuries, Spinoza—but was there an air of spite in his treatment of William James? My own sense is that he was disappointed in James, whom he knew to be a superior man but not unfortunately superior enough to rise above what to Santayana was the stultifying atmosphere of *fin de siècle* Harvard. When James once accused Santayana of impertinence and of putting on airs, Santayana shot back: "I wonder if you realize the years of suppressed irritation which I have passed in the midst of an unintelligible sanctimonious and often disingenuous Protestantism, which is thoroughly alien to and repulsive to me, and the need I have of joining hands with something far away from it and far above it." In a later letter he charged James with not seeing "my philosophy, nor my temper from the inside." Part of this could be put down to sheer clash

of temperament; yet perhaps a greater part is owing to William James's impatience with the type of the artist, which Santayana most assuredly was. Odd that a man such as William James, who had so much sympathy, should in this regard have had so little imagination. One remembers here his inevitably disappointing letters to his brother Henry about Henry's books, with his, William's, invocations to Henry to try harder to write for the multitude, to which Henry on one occasion responded: "... I'm always sorry when I hear of your reading anything of mine, and always hope you won't—you seem to me so constitutionally unable to 'enjoy' it, and so condemned to look at it from a point of view remotely alien to mine in writing it..." As for Santayana, when he met Henry James, for the first and only time, toward the end of James's life, he seems to have understood him immediately and completely:

Those were his last years and I never saw him again. Nevertheless in that one interview he made me feel more at home, and better understood, than his brother William ever had done in the long years of our acquaintance. Henry was calm, he liked to see things as they are, and be free afterwards to imagine how they might have been. We talked about different countries as places of residence. He was of course subtle and bland, appreciative of all points of view, and amused at their limitations.

Was it the artist in Santayana who discouraged the teacher in him? He never set out to become a teacher. Had he not been offered a half-time instructorship at Harvard, Professor McCormick informs us, he would have studied architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Santayana preferred not to be thought a professor. A poet, yes; a philosopher, certainly; a continuing student, inevitably; but a professor, "I would rather beg than be one essentially." From the day he began teaching he began saving for the day he could cease teaching. He claimed that no close friend of his was ever a professor. Lee Simonson, the

stage designer who was a student of Santayana's, recalls him when lecturing "gazing over our heads as if looking for the sail that was to bear him home"—though where, exactly, home was could not have been all that clear even to Santayana, except away from Harvard.

"So you are trying to teach philosophy at Harvard," Henry Adams said to Santayana on the one occasion when they met. "I once tried to teach history there, but it can't be done. It isn't really possible to teach anything." Santayana, had he been older, would have disagreed; it could be done, all right; for him the question was always whether it was worth doing. In a beautiful but cool passage in *Character and Opinion in the United States*, Santayana neatly described teaching with an accuracy that only those who have *tried* to give their best to teaching will readily recognize:

Teaching is a delightful paternal art, and especially teaching intelligent and warm-hearted youngsters, as most American collegians are; but it is an art like acting, where the performance, often rehearsed, must be adapted to an audience hearing it only once. The speaker must make concessions to their impatience, their taste, their capacity, their prejudices, their ultimate good; he must neither bore nor perplex nor demoralise them. His thoughts must be such as can flow daily, and be set down in notes; they must come when the bell rings and stop appropriately when the bell rings a second time. The best that is in him, as Mephistopheles says in *Faust*, he dare not tell them; and as the substance of this possession is spiritual, to withhold is often to lose it. For it is not merely a matter of fearing not to be understood, or giving offence; in the presence of a hundred upturned faces a man cannot, without diffidence, speak in his own person, of his own thoughts; he needs support, in order to exert influence with a good conscience; unless he feels that he is the vehicle of a massive tradition, he will become bitter, or flippant, or aggressive; if he is to teach with good grace and modesty and authority, it must not be he

that speaks, but science or humanity that is speaking in him.

Complain about teaching though Santayana did, he had a most impressive roster of students attend his classes and lectures at Harvard. Among them, as Professor McCormick reminds us, were Conrad Aiken, Robert Frost, Gilbert Seldes, Max Eastman, Harry Austryn Wolfson, Samuel Eliot Morison, Felix Frankfurter, T. S. Eliot, and Van Wyck Brooks. Wallace Stevens never took a course from Santayana, but was very much aware of his presence, and later wrote a splendid poem about him, "To an Old Philosopher in Rome." Walter Lippmann while a graduate student was his assistant. Most of these figures came away greatly impressed by Santayana's teaching. Only T. S. Eliot would later describe his lectures as "soporific"; and Van Wyck Brooks, in his autobiography, claimed to find Santayana's "assumption of superiority" repellent and his "feline aestheticism" (Brooks was, avowedly, a canine man) no less so. Brooks was also put off by Santayana's distaste for things American, "though I could not deny that, wandering alone, a stranger and exile everywhere, Santayana lived the true life of the sage."

Did Santayana actually hate America? I think he came near to doing so, without quite hating Americans. Around the time of his preparing to depart the United States for good, he wrote to his sister that "I am far from wishing never to see my American friends again. It is only *their country* that I am longing to lose sight of." He felt America to be a country where people were interested in what might or should be, whereas his sympathies were all for preserving the already formed. In America, ideas and traditions were not refuted but simply forgotten. The serenity for which he longed was not available in America, not even in religion: "Be Christians," he claimed once to have heard a president of Yale tell his students, "be Christians and you will be successful." Returning from a trip to California and Canada, he wrote to his sister in Avila:

"They are intellectually emptier than the Sahara, where I understand the Arabs have some idea of God or of Fate." In the same letter he remarks that at Harvard, "in the midst of the dull round, a sort of instinct of courtesy makes me take it [America] for granted, and I become almost unconscious of how much I hate it all; otherwise I couldn't have stood it for *forty years!*"

In 1911, Santayana worked out an arrangement whereby he would teach a single term at Harvard, leaving him otherwise free to live abroad, there to indulge his "*native* affinities to European things." But when his mother died, in 1912, he wrote, from Paris, a letter of resignation to President Abbott Lawrence Lowell of Harvard saying that his mother's death marked "the moment when I should carry out the plan I have always had of giving up teaching, returning to live in Europe, and devoting myself to literary work. Each of these things is an object in itself sufficient to determine me, and the three conspire together." He was almost fifty, and free at last.

Henceforth Santayana would guard that freedom with the most sedulous care. Financially independent—one of his Sturgis relations had invested his money for him wisely—he had no social ambitions, required no regular circle of friends, no fixed abode, no round of engagements. He was not in any way reclusive, and rather enjoyed such people who came his way—the stray poet or philosopher, the handsome and agreeable woman—but, as he put it in *Persons and Places*: "For constant company I had enough, and too much, with myself." Besides, he "liked solitude in crowds, meals in restaurants, walks in public parks, architectural rambles in noble cities." Boundless and boundary-less, he roamed free, all of Europe his demesne, like a Henry James character from the late period with all the Jamesian sensibility, but without any interior conflict requiring resolution.

Santayana's cousin Howard Sturgis, who was a friend of Henry James's and who lived in England, accused Santayana of being

abominably selfish. Santayana allowed that he was merely “profoundly selfish,” the distinction residing in the sense that, while he took pleasure in the life around him, he determined never to enter into relationships that would cause him to surrender his independence. (In fact, as Professor McCormick recounts, once his books began to sell well, Santayana was most generous in providing financial help to family and friends.) He then goes on to make the distinction that his selfishness is not of a competitive kind. “I don’t want to snatch money or position or pleasures from other people, nor do I attempt to dominate them, as an unselfish man would say, for their own good.” Master of irony that Santayana is, in owning up to his own selfishness he makes us recognize that it is the unselfish man of that subordinate clause who is the real menace.

The power of making distinctions, which can result in parching dryness in a pedantic philosopher, is in Santayana always a pleasure to behold. The smaller the distinction, often, the more charm it has. Thus in *Persons and Places* one finds people who are argumentative but not critical, others who are cordial but not amiable; then others who have warmth but no passion. One man—specifically, Spinoza—is “virtuous but not normal”; and another—specifically, Frank Russell—is “polygamous without being inconstant.” A writer able to wield a linguistic cleaver with such skill makes one feel one’s own prose has been cut, most coarsely, on a large buzz saw. Santayana also had the power, which Aristotle said cannot be taught, of constructing dazzling metaphors and similes. Thus (again) in *Persons and Places* one comes upon buildings whose surfaces are stark and unyielding, thin and sharp, “like impoverished old maids”; frail elms, “like tall young women in consumption”; an aunt said to be “living out of the fifth act of the tragedy of her life”; the speech of William Lyon Phelps, “his every word . . . a cocktail, or at least a temperance drink.” It was Santayana who once referred to those philosophers whose writing gave no aesthetic pleasure—among them Epicu-

rus, St. Thomas Aquinas, Immanuel Kant—as “leafless forests”; to retain that botanical metaphor a moment longer, his own prose is a field of orchids on a mountain slope.

But, then, it occurs to me, Santayana might have been repelled by the metaphor. A field of orchids perhaps plays too strongly into the stereotype of Santayana’s reputation as the most dandiacal among modern philosophers. Orchids are all very beautiful, but one cannot after all derive sustenance from them; and might not the same be said of Santayana’s philosophy? Santayana is perhaps best known for his book on aesthetics, *The Sense of Beauty*, but in fact it is not a book he greatly esteemed (he also had strong reservations about his other well-known work, *The Life of Reason*); and Professor McCormick informs us that the book secured promotion for Santayana to an assistant professorship at Harvard. Yet, powerful literary critic though he could be, and thoroughly literary though his sensibility was—*The Complete Poems of George Santayana* (1979) runs to more than five hundred pages, and his single excursion into fiction, *The Last Puritan* (1935), had a popular success—Santayana thought of himself as a philosopher, and a philosopher primarily.

He was, however, a philosopher of a particular kind—and the kind can best be distinguished by his method and his temperament. He was not a logician and he did not come to philosophy through science, for he had no scientific training of any serious sort. He never claimed originality for himself, and once remarked that all he cared for “is to sift the *truth* from traditional *imagination*, without impoverishing the latter.” As early as 1887, when he was twenty-four years old, he wrote to William James to say that he had no interest in the philosophy that sets out to solve problems, and that philosophy, for him, was “rather an attempt to express a half-discovered reality, just as art is, and that two different renderings, if they are expressive, far from cancelling each other add to each other’s values . . .” Nearly thirty years later he wrote to a younger man just beginning a career in phi-

losophy that, while he could not take the teaching of philosophy seriously, he did think philosophy "might be a life or a means of artistic expression."

For Santayana, of course, philosophy was both a life and an art: he lived his philosophy and he lavished attention on the production of it of the kind that the superior artist does upon his art. As a philosopher, he was no system builder, and attempts at elaborate argument in his technical philosophy are often difficult to follow. He was himself well aware of this, and when Logan Pearsall Smith proposed an anthology of his work that eventually appeared under the title *Little Essays, Drawn from the Writings of George Santayana* (1920), Santayana, in remarking on Smith's initial selection, wrote: "my impression is that what I have to say is better conveyed in these occasional epigrams than in any of my attempts at argument or system." There was the additional difficulty that Santayana used certain key philosophical terms—"moral," "science," "genius," "substance," "intuition," and "spirit," among others—with special, sometimes quite slippery, meanings. This, too, he knew: "Philosophy seems to be richer in theories than in words to express them in; and much confusion results from the necessity of using old terms in new meanings." Owing to this, Santayana's philosophy, like certain poems, does not paraphrase easily, if at all.

Like many another artist, Santayana was a brilliant critic of practitioners of his art. Although he claimed to despise an atmosphere of contention and controversy, he could handle the stiletto with the best of them. Frequently he chose to do so in the privacy of letters, as when, in one such letter, he describes G. E. Moore's *Principia Ethica* as a book that "seems to contain a grain of accuracy in a bushel of inexperience." Such is Bertrand Russell's intelligence and clarity, that "the more wrong he is the clearer he makes the wrongness of his position; and what more can you expect a philosopher to prove except that the views he has adopted are radically and eternally impossible? If every philosopher had done

that in the past, we should now be almost out of the wood." To witness Santayana at work in his job as critic of philosophers one cannot do better than to read the brief book entitled *Egotism in German Philosophy* (1916), in which, with great economy, he works up—and over—the German philosophical system builders. When he is done the landscape of German philosophy resembles nothing so much as Berlin in early 1946: scarcely any buildings are left standing, only a few shabby figures shuffle past, the smell of smoke is in the air. Toward the close of his life, he wrote: "If I were not too old and could venture to write in French, I should compose a short history of *Les Faux Pas de la Philosophie*."

At the heart of Santayana's philosophy is a desire to be un-illusioned about the world and yet, unlike (say) Nietzsche, neither in despair nor in great anguish about it. "I was never afraid of disillusion," Santayana wrote in the opening essay of *The Philosophy of George Santayana*, the volume devoted to his work in the Library of Living Philosophers series, "and I chose it." Perhaps it is just as accurate to say that disillusion chose him, given his upbringing in a house crowded with Spanish relatives, where, as a small boy, he witnessed women giving birth and, not much older, he shared a room with a half-brother of adolescent years and normal appetites. His father was an atheist, who found the idea of the existence of God ridiculous; his mother was a pantheist, who believed God existed but was everywhere and hence was quite impersonal. Being born without much of it, he early knew that money was not an illusion. He never for a moment seems to have felt that the world was "a myth, to be clarified by a little literary criticism." Yet everything in his background conduced against his overestimating the importance of human beings in the universe. As he announced in a lecture on Herbert Spencer entitled "The Unknowable," life is not "an entertainment, a feast of ordered sensations . . . life is no such thing; it is a predicament. We are caught in it; it is something compulsory, urgent, dangerous, and

tempting. We are surrounded by enormous, mysterious, half-friendly forces." And yet this only makes it all the more fascinating.

To feel the vanity of life—that everything changes and everything simultaneously remains the same—was for Santayana "the beginning of seriousness." To trot out the "isms," he claimed allegiance to materialism, the family of doctrines that give a primary place to matter, and to naturalism, which in *Three Philosophical Poets* (1910) he described as an "intellectual philosophy" that "divines substance behind appearance, continuity behind change, law behind fortune." But more to the point, Santayana believed that "man was not made to understand the world, but to live in it. Yet nature, in some of us, lets out her secret; it spoils the game, but it associates us with her own impartiality." That secret, as mentioned earlier, is that the world is not organized for man, that "morally," as he put it in *Persons and Places*, "all things are neutral in themselves. It is we that bathe them in whatever emotion may be passing through us." A qualified pessimism, an almost happy pessimism, is at the center of Santayana's philosophy:

I have never seen much evidence of happiness in human life; but personally I cannot complain of my lot. It has been tolerable enough to allow me to be disinterested in speculation and therefore happy in it, as musicians can be happy in music or mathematicians in mathematics. But as men we are all sad failures. The world is a blind power, is too much for us, even for a Napoleon or a Goethe. But the same world, as an object of thought, is a wonderful theme; to understand it, virtually and mythically, as a man may, is the supreme triumph of life over life, the complete catharsis. Nonetheless, from the point of view of the animal in man, the truth remains tragic. An animal can be confident and brave only if he does not know the truth.

This ought to be depressing in the extreme, and yet, somehow, it isn't—as it isn't in the company of two other American laughing pessimists, Justice Holmes and H. L. Menck-

en. There is something grand about someone who can think the worst—in this instance positing an existence in an uncaring universe whose end can only be oblivion—and yet play bravely on through. "Survival is something impossible," Santayana wrote, "but it is possible to have lived well and died well."

Santayana was in the odd category of being a non-believing (or free-thinking) Catholic—a believer, in effect, in the doctrine that there was no God and Mary is his mother. Although he grew up in the Church, he early lost his faith, yet never quite lost his appreciation for the Church as an ancient institution of civilization, despite his belief that "the loss of illusions is an unmixed blessing." He tolerated what he once characterized as the "absurdity and fiction in religion" because he felt that men, having "no adequate knowledge and no trained courage in respect to their destiny," have "to believe something or other, and that is their necessary religion." He himself favored a belief in something beyond man, and, it is not going too far to say, detested those who believed in nothing greater than man. Yet he was gentler in his views of paganism than he was of other modern religions. "To be a Protestant is to be cross-eyed," he once wrote. And on the Jews he was much harder.

Professor McCormick's admiration for Santayana does not blind him to the fact that Santayana had what is euphemistically known as a "Jewish problem." It can scarcely be ignored. One will be reading along, swept away by Santayana's penetration or powers of formulation or elegant wit, and, bang!, up will pop the devil. Thus, lulled by the pleasant chat of a letter written from Madrid, one comes upon the complaint that Santayana found Florence in December beastly, because "the expatriated anaemic aesthetes and the Jews surprised to find that success is not happiness made a moral atmosphere not wholesome to breathe . . ." Such remarks do not qualify as gratuitous; they are more in the nature of compulsive. How explain this? Some of it may have been

owing to Brahmanic Boston, whose anti-Semitic spirit Santayana might have caught. But even more, one suspects, may be owing to Santayana's disgust at what, in a letter written when he was not yet thirty, he termed the Jews' "incredible conceit of believing that they had made a covenant with nature, by which the mastery of the earth and all the good things thereof were secured to them in return for fidelity to a certain social and religious organization." In Santayana's philosophy, nature (or, if one prefers, God) favors no one. Yet to allow such disgust to lead into such dismal slurs is a blot of prejudice, as Professor McCormick writes, "unworthy of a man of his fineness in other matters, and scarcely comprehensible in the man who wrote *The Life of Reason* and *Realms of Being*."

It is also a blot on Santayana's disinterestedness, for, apart from his mania on the subject of the Jews, Santayana, when it came to disinterestedness, could make the calmer gods of Olympus seem as grubby as the asphalt-contractors lobby in the Texas legislature. Here was a man unassimilable by choice, who thought it an indignity "to have a soul controlled by geography" (that is, by patriotism), who wished to be associated with the impartiality of nature, and for whom it was axiomatic that "in the end every philosopher has to walk alone." When Santayana remarked that he was concerned about losing the "cruelty" of his philosophy if he remained in England, what he meant was that he was concerned about his thought losing its edge through his adopting the attachments and passions of ordinary men. However beautiful his manners or convivial his tone, there was a deep impersonality about Santayana. It was the impersonality of the classical artist devoted, in his case, to the art of philosophy.

Time might transmute, without erasing, my first opinions and affections; I might wish to change my surroundings and way of living; I never undertook to change myself. I regard my occupations and interests somewhat as an actor regards his various parts or a painter his

subjects. That a man has preferences and can understand and do one thing better than another, follows from his inevitable limitations and definite gifts; but that which marks progress in his life is the purity of his art; I mean the degree to which his art has become his life, so that the rest of his nature does not impede or corrupt his art, but only feeds it.

How did Santayana's impartiality square with his politics? Santayana was always interested in politics, but could he be said to have had politics? During World War I, he found himself siding with England, where he was living at the time. But he lived through World War II, now quite an old man, in fascist Italy, without any qualms, above it all and, by then, choosing to be quite out of it. He was conservative by temper, and in his autobiography wrote that he loved Tory England and honored conservative Spain, though not "with any dogmatic or democratic passion," adding: "If any community can become and wishes to become communistic or democratic or anarchical I wish it joy from the bottom of my heart. I have only two qualms in this case: whether such ideals are realisable, and whether those who pursue them fancy them to be exclusively and universally right: an illusion pregnant with injustice, oppression, and war." Yet in 1977 Sidney Hook, who when a young man much admired Santayana's *The Life of Reason*, published in *The American Scholar* a series of letters that Santayana had written to him, in one of which (dated June 8, 1934) Santayana wrote:

But I love order in the sense of organized, harmonious, consecrated living; and for this reason I sympathize with the Soviets and the Fascists and the Catholics, but not at all with the liberals. I should sympathize with the Nazis too, if their system were, even in theory, founded on reality; but it is Nietzschean, founded on will; and therefore a sort of romanticism gone mad, rather than a serious organization of material forces—which would be the only way, I think, of securing moral coherence.

Others accused Santayana of being sympathetic to fascism. Professor McCormick does not justify Santayana's late-life politics, but he does attempt to explain them, citing other factors that need to be taken into account: "He was never politically active; his attitudes were aristocratic, illiberal by any modern definition of the word, at base philosophical." I myself prefer to think it one of those embarrassing moments for a great philosopher, and an example of the danger of coming at the complexities of the contemporary world from too high, too lofty, yes, even too philosophical a position. The dogs may bark, yet sometimes the caravan is carrying parts for gas chambers and needs to be stopped.

When World War II began in 1939, Santayana was seventy-six years old and permanently settled in Rome. Two years later he moved into the Clinica della Piccola Compagna di Maria, or Hospital of the Blue Nuns, an Irish order so named because of the color of their habit. The fees for his stay were paid through another center the order maintained in Chicago, for his money, held in America, could not be sent to Italy during the war. There, isolated from the war, easily able to deflect all efforts by the nuns to convert him ("He has too much brains," he reported Mother Superior saying of him, in justification of their failure), he worked away at his final books. Unlike so many of his American contemporaries interested in artistic and intellectual life, unlike Oliver Alden, the hero of *The Last Puritan*, Santayana up to the very end showed no signs, in his own phrase, of "petering out."

When after the war Edmund Wilson, writing pieces for *The New Yorker* about Europe in the wake of World War II that would eventually be published as *Europe Without Baedeker*, visited Santayana in his

austere room at the Hospital of the Blue Nuns, he, Wilson, was immensely impressed. It seemed to Wilson that Santayana was "perhaps the most international—or, better, the most supra-national—personality I had ever met." The fire of intellect, Wilson found, still burned in the all but worn-out furnace that was Santayana's aged body. Wilson's meeting with Santayana appears to have been rather like Santayana's with Henry James. The least sentimental of men, Wilson on this occasion was greatly moved, and closes his essay by writing that "the intelligence that has persisted in him has been that of the civilized human race—so how can he be lonely or old? He still loves to share in its thoughts, to try on its points of view. He has made it his business to extend himself into every kind of human consciousness with which he can establish contact, and he reposes on his shabby chaise longue like a monad in the universal mind." This is, of course, the way that every serious writer should like to end.

Wilson wrote that he did not imagine Santayana was troubled by the thought of his impending death, and he seems to have been right. It was cancer that reached his liver that finally brought about his death. When he knew he was going to die, he instructed his amanuensis Daniel Cory not to believe, should he not be present, any stories about his deathbed conversion to the one Church that had ever mattered to him. Two days before his death, when Daniel Cory asked if he were suffering, Santayana is said to have answered, "Yes, my friend. But my anguish is entirely physical; there are no moral difficulties whatsoever." Philosophy had been for him, as for Boethius, a consolation, but finally also life itself. In the end he died as a philosopher should, his thoughts in order, at peace.

Paul Klee now

by Jed Perl

The Paul Klee retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art was the great museum show in New York this past season.¹ It was a case of the Modern doing what it does best—delivering the classic modern goods. The museum staff was obviously in deep sympathy with the artist. How else could they have brought off this inspired installation, in which paintings we've known for years in Paris, Philadelphia, Washington, and New York found their perfect partners and places on the wall? The blessed absence of entry-point audio-tour salespeople and exit-point gift shops didn't prevent Paul Klee from being a hit with the crowd that goes to perhaps half a dozen exhibitions a year. And unlike some shows that have pulled in the museumgoing public—unlike, for instance, the Modern's own those-were-the-days Vienna extravaganza and the Whitney's swash-buckling Sargent retrospective—Klee was

an exhibit to which artists were also going, and going five and ten times. For some younger painters it might turn out to be one of those it-changed-my-life experiences.

The crabbed products of Klee's symbolist and Art Nouveau youth were wisely kept in a kind of anteroom, so that his entry into the avant-garde at the beginning of World War I could hit viewers with full force in the show's first gallery. Here, in works done between 1914 and 1919, he's already in command of his singular synthesis of Cubist construction, Fauvist color, and a Da Vincian synthetic imagination. With the North African landscapes and such fantasies as *Genesis of the Stars* (1914), Klee offers us a view all his own, and we're hooked, and we stick right by him to the show's extraordinary close. There are many modern European artists who've been interested in non-European art, but Klee is the only painter who found a way of building an entire world-class career outside of easel painting. In that first room he pulls us into a Persian-miniature relationship to the image. You don't stand back and look at a painting, you draw close and *read* it: you read the movement of many small parts in relation to one another, you read the tell-it-all titles, and you read the haunting, unpredictable mixing of media. Later on, as Klee's scale expands, he lets you move back a bit and take a wider look, but you're still reading, you're still examining images piece by piece, clue by clue. A career so much at odds with the mainstream of Western paint-

1 "Paul Klee" was on view at the Museum of Modern Art from February 12 through May 5. It will be at the Cleveland Museum of Art from June 24 through August 16; from there it travels to the Kunstmuseum Bern in Switzerland (September 25 through January 3, 1988). The show's curator is Carolyn Lanchner, from the Department of Painting and Sculpture at MOMA, in collaboration with Jürgen Glaesemer, curator of the Paul Klee Foundation in Bern. The catalogue, edited by Carolyn Lanchner, was published by MOMA with the assistance of the J. Paul Getty Trust (344 pages, \$65).

ing ought to end up niggling and precarious; but Klee's amplitude of reference and emotional generosity keep opening up unforeseen perspectives. He comes on like a pussycat, but you never get to the bottom of the layers in his mind.

Klee, who was born in Switzerland in 1879, met the Delaunays and Picasso in Paris early on, was a close friend of Kandinsky's, participated in the Blaue Reiter group, and taught a famous series of courses at the Bauhaus. Nevertheless, he's one of those rare pictorial geniuses whose achievement stands somewhat outside the capitals of art. In an essay published in 1941, the year after Klee died, Clement Greenberg said that "Klee is to the modern painters of Paris somewhat as the school of Siena was to that of Florence in the early Renaissance." It's an attractive analogy, especially when Greenberg goes on to observe that Klee is "less realistic and at the same time more literary and sentimental . . . Klee's [works] live in a more fictive medium and require of the spectator a greater dislocation, a greater shift." Still, it would be a mistake to see Klee's vision as hemmed in by a particular local history or geography, as the work of the Sienese masters was. He's more in the mold of the displaced European intellectual who feels drawn to several cultural traditions at once, and uses his outsider's status as an asset. Klee doesn't suffer from a crippling sense of homelessness; he feels free. He makes us believe that the whole world of art and culture is his home.

You pick up a sort of meandering trail of thoughts and memories every time you look at a Klee. Take *Florentine Villa District* (1926). Into a pink- and mustard-toned stucco surface Klee has inscribed buildings, row upon row. Think of Florence: the city of frescoes, and pinkish fresco color; but also of quiet quarters, where cultivated foreigners visit and sometimes stay for a lifetime. Let the associations go: quattrocento revolutionaries, nineteenth-century poets; the graffiti on old walls; a painting as smudged and moldering as a medieval monument; the pile-up of periods, all those who've passed

by. Or look at *Ad marginem* (1930), that picture with the smooth surface of a vellum page. Begin with the Latin title, which makes us think of those medieval illuminated manuscripts where the artist's interest is often focused on the margins. Notice how the sun is at the center of the page, and the grass and plants and animals are sprouting from the four sides, all around. This is a landscape in which the edges of the rectangle are the soil—an idea only possible after Cubism has abolished gravity in painting, which in turn carries us back to the fourteenth century, to the Books of Hours and the beginnings of the naturalism that Cubism ultimately undid.

The secret of this stream-of-consciousness visual art style rests in line, which, as Klee explained in his "Creative Credo" of 1920, expresses movement, change. Line is a kind of seismographic emanation of the mind. "Art does not reproduce the visible but makes visible. The very nature of graphic art lures us to abstraction, readily and with reason. It gives the schematic fairy-tale quality of the imaginary and expresses it with great precision." Klee pulls in everything. What other artist did such a thorough ransacking of the Middle East, Africa, and South Seas, as well as the folk-art traditions of Europe? Klee even designs variations and improvisations on modern avant-garde styles: on the work of the Constructivists, and, if I'm not mistaken, of the Surrealists (who'd originally been influenced by him). No one has made more profound art out of the layerings of memory in our image-besotted modern minds. In the pointillist paintings of 1931 and 1932 one is made conscious all at once of Seurat, Cézanne, and Roman mosaics—not to mention geology, atomic particles, and music theory. Klee draws out of us all we know about the present and the past. He's a wizard for the cognoscenti; he makes knowing things part of the fun—the more connections you can make, the deeper in you can go. He makes us equate certain emotions with certain art memories, and he swishes those memories around together beautifully, lyrically.

Klee's work up to the early Thirties is well represented in American collections; but the immense production of his final decade has remained in Europe—mostly in Switzerland, where he died in 1940 from a rare degenerative skin disease. The Modern show gives us our first opportunity, certainly in many years, to see what Klee did after he'd left Germany under the pressure of the Nazis in 1933. There has always been a contingent that saw the late work as a falling off. I suspect this view is grounded in the belief that Klee was essentially a little artist, and that he betrayed his gifts when, in the Thirties, in an effort to respond to the darkening European scene, he reached for a bolder, flatter, heavier kind of impact. I've always had questions about the late work—especially about the queer style of creased, deformed-looking figures. But at MOMA, where the key late paintings were all in place, this work felt like a logical, inevitable development—a heightening and intensification of ideas that had been in there all along.

The four- or five-foot paintings of the late Thirties are like scaled down, portable murals. Klee's key borrowings here seem to be from Egyptian wall painting. In works such as *Legend of the Nile* (1937) and details such as the hieroglyph-eye in *Intention* (1938) the Egyptology is unabashed—Klee must have been fascinated by a funerary decor that had nothing to do with either Greece or Rome. But Egypt offered something more essential—a way of floating graphic signs onto an expanded field. The surface becomes increasingly open; in the watery imagery of *Rusting Ships*, *Rich Harbor*, and *Insula Dulcamara* (all 1938), he's halfway between Egypt and the nineteenth-century seascape painters. After this come the fetus, cauliflower, and brain shapes—they're unnerving yet familiar, and may owe something to Picasso's scrambled figuration of the early Thirties. Through his Egyptian sign languages and biomorphic deformations Klee forged the first late style in twentieth-century art. It probably influenced the development of Braque and Picasso, each of whom visited Klee in Switzerland toward the end of his life. Klee's late style is based

on transformations and metamorphoses. The beautiful, full-foliaged, gray-green *At the Hunter Tree* (1939) is like some spongy, scrunched-up giant; while the teapot and vases in the last *Untitled (Still Life)* (1940) use their handles and spouts as arms with which to wave farewell. Coming at the close of an unforgettable retrospective, these pictures have some of the same jittery drama that the last Picassos had at his MOMA retrospective in 1980. You arrive at them feeling full and overfull, and those intimations of darkness and panic send you over the top. Only Klee, in *O! These Rumors!* (1939), and in *Death and Fire* and *The Cupboard* (both 1940), works on us with a quiet intensity that may go deeper than Picasso's dazzling slob-genius shenanigans.

In recent years a great deal of scholarly attention has focused on Klee, probably because he's one of the few twentieth-century artists to whom the art historian's iconographic methodology can be readily applied. There have been some formidable art-historical essays written about Klee—the research has really panned out. But the study of iconography (which was developed in order to reclaim for the modern viewer a web of references and associations that would have been relatively obvious to the Renaissance or Baroque artist's cultivated contemporaries) isn't all that necessary for the museumgoer's understanding of Klee. Happily, we still share Klee's general cultural framework—the worlds of art, music, and science still look much the way they did to him.

But even if we have little trouble getting the general drift of Klee's thought, we may leave the retrospective awestruck at his ability to find a form to express his every thought. We're in the hands of an artist who's actually communicating with us through paint—and that's miraculous, coming at a time when most painters don't seem to know how to communicate and when the self-styled communicators in the art world don't know or care about painting. Klee puts it all together; he plants an idea within a painting, and we actually enter into that

idea, and feel through it. You don't have to know that the paintings he called Magic Squares are based on music theory to enter into the discourses between different voices that go on in *Rhythmical* (1930) and *New Harmony* (1936). When there's a little figure walking through one of Klee's landscapes, it's a floating intelligence. Klee makes us think about how the weather, geography, terrain touch that little figure; he builds toward a fairly complicated sense of the world. Whether a Klee is totally abstract or rather figurative, the artist never lets us think *at* the painting. We're not theorizing; we're connecting to something that's built into the image; we're thinking *out of* the painting. He generates an unprecedented variety of thoughts from paint. It's in this sense that Klee is a far greater artist than Miró, whose work, both collectively and individually, has a more coherent look, for the simple reason that it's less richly generative of thought.

Of all the modern painters, none speaks more urgently to the present moment than Paul Klee. As time goes by Matisse and Picasso and even Mondrian look more and more like an integral part of the European tradition, and that tradition looks more and more like something to which we'll never again have an uncomplicated connection. Klee is different. He conceived the studio as a laboratory, and developed an elaborate methodology that recalls the approach of the scientific researcher. His lectures and notebooks—posthumously collected in two enormous volumes, *The Thinking Eye* and *The Nature of Nature*—come out of the same need to address epochal transitions that had earlier given birth to Da Vinci's writings. In

Klee's thought there's an in-depth acceptance of how far we've travelled from the world that supported traditional art-gallery art. Unlike Mondrian and Kandinsky, though, he finds little consolation in spirituality or idealism. Klee studied the changes taking place in civilization—in art, music, science, mathematics, the state. He lived through the destabilization of culture that sent Duchamp and so many others into the no-man's-land of anti-art, but he wouldn't turn his back on art. He had a courage—and a gift—that puts Duchamp and his progeny to shame. Klee is the outsider as modern hero; he's also the romantic comedian who sent up everything and yet won through to the heart of Western art in the end.

In his earliest images, especially those grotesque "Inventions" of 1905, Klee eulogized the dying graphic traditions of Middle Europe and the nasty, angular style of the Viennese Art Nouveau. The work of the twenty-six-year-old artist was like a dry river bed, full of peculiar fossils and queer remnants of lost civilizations. It looked like a dead end, until, at the beginning of World War I, he found it within himself to flood that old river bed with the pure waters of modern French art, and suddenly everything sprang to life—a new life, full of unforeseen evolutionary leaps. For Klee—and for us—painting is a river or an ocean on which we venture forth. Nothing is fixed or solid, and we can look up, down, to left and right, forward and back. Painting is the Mediterranean, with its classical traditions; the Rhine, with its fairy tales and Wagnerian myths; but also the Nile and the River Styx. In some of his last pictures, Klee is climbing into Charon's boat, for a visit to Hell.

Poems *by Donald Hall, Louis Simpson,
Gibbons Ruark, Florence Grossman
& David Paul*

Words over Amos

A young red male, long-haired
 with a tail like a fox's,
with bird-feathers of fur
 upstarting between his toes;
who emitted a brief squeak
 of astonishment, like air
squeezed from a rubber doll,
 when he jumped to the floor
from a high bookcase; who rattled
 a doorknob trying to open
the door for himself; who,
 if we then opened it,
declined our absurd
 well-meaning suggestion
that he walk through it;
 who begged for meat and milk
like any cat; who nursed at us
 drooling and kneading;
who bounced and never walked;
 who moused assiduously
and lacking mice ripped hunks
 of carpetpad out

for swatting to and fro;
 who spent most waking hours
birdwatching from the pantry
 window; who looked long
into our eyes with evident
 curiosity and loved
to sprawl upside-down
 in our arms, splaying
long legs stiffly out,
 great ruffled tail
dangling; who abruptly
 wasted and died
of liver failure; whom
 we buried this morning
by the barn in the cat's
 graveyard under blue asters
tamping dirt down over
 a last red ear.

—*Donald Hall*

Waking the next morning

His bladder signalled first,
A commonplace request
Accompanied by thirst.
He looked outside. The west
Looked back with changing weather.
Then in his mind he heard,
Repeated, last night's word,
That changed his life forever.

—*Donald Hall*

Trouble

I went to see my old friend
Greg.

He was in the kitchen
slicing radishes.

I explained
what had brought me. He said,
“Let me see if I understand.
You’re worried because you’re happy?”

I said, “It’s not so absurd.
Take any writer, even Tolstoy . . .
he talks about happy families
being all the same. Misery,
that’s all people care about.
They won’t go to a concert
unless it’s discordant, a ballet
unless it takes place in a hospital
and the dancers are wound in bandages.”

“Enough,” he said, “already.
What do you care about such people?”

Having made the salad, he decided
it was his to do with as he pleased . . .
put his fingers in and mucked it about,
picked out a mushroom.

“Stay for dinner,” he said. I said no thanks.

*

I take my trouble to bed with me.
When I wake in the morning
it’s there, refreshed by a good night’s sleep.

Writing poetry used to be easy.
“The stag at eve had drunk his fill”
got you off to a running start.

“What are you thinking?”
says Miriam, who for some time
has been awake.

“I ought to do something
post-structural. A monkey version
of *Hamlet*.”

She says, “I don’t follow.”

“It’s a theory. If you chain monkeys
to typewriters, one of them
sooner or later will write *Hamlet*.
I’ll write it, changing a few words . . .”

“Shakespeare,” she says.
“Shakespeare was the monkey,
the one who typed *Hamlet*
exactly, word for word.”

I stare at her, stunned
and speechless with admiration.

*

I’m looking out the window
at a beagle, a beagle-terrier,
and a westie. Some trees.
A sky empty and void of ideas.

I think the powers that be
have decided, “That’s enough,
no more poetry for this fellow,
just life, since he likes it so much.

From where we sit, on Olympus,
as far as we can see
it's dirt and weeds and bricks
with creatures crawling between.

What we like is a burnt offering . . .
not just cooked, scorched black,
a heart turning on a spit
over the fires of greed
and lust and self-loathing.

But a white birch by a door,
sunlight breaking from a cloud,
yellow and purple tips
pushing up from the ground,
and the woman he's so fond of . . .

if that's all he wants, let him have it,
there's nothing we can do for him."

—*Louis Simpson*

At the graves in memory

The land there rolls no more than the quiet river
Curves. Drifts of pine straw resin the ground.
Summer is remembered like a wild fever

That left the forehead when the sun went down.
That February day was mild as Easter.
There to the west of my abandoned town,

Shirt-sleeved gravediggers smoked at a corner
Of lawn unbroken by an upright stone.
Soft wind in the pines, the sound of water

Stilled in memory, the merciful brief drone
Of the old liturgy, and it was over.
My mother's body by my father's bones.

Winter. Easter weather. Long gone life-givers.
The land there rolls no more than the quiet river.

—*Gibbons Ruark*

Wayside flowers on the Hazel Brae

Daybreak of your voice across the ocean
Swept through me like a fresh wind over water
And left my longing palpable and keen.
Now I'm walking the Brae in windy weather,
Dark, then bright, then dark as the cloud-shapes alter.
The vagabond wildrose blooms in the ditches,
Swaying in wind as it would float on water.
Over the next rise, a meadow of daisies
Is spotted with clover as dark as wine
Or what stipples you when you come from the shower
And lie down near me not entirely dry.
A drift of light rain falls across the air
As I walk the Brae away from you, caught
Up in flowers and the flower of my thought.

—*Gibbons Ruark*

Planting bulbs in September

The leaves have begun to turn on the mountain.
Set free, they do a little shimmy in the wind.
All things hang in the balance,

the night as long as the day
as if the earth, itself, were suspended
on a giant gimbal. What was it

we believed—
if you caught a falling leaf,
it meant happiness. Somewhere,

in the attic, books
still press those leaves. It's why
we dig the shallow graves each year,

spread the roots gently, like hair,
mound the earth over the crown
and place the marker that tells us,

here lies "Small Ways," "Yellow Chimes,"
that we trust will rise
and flower in the spring,

when without even asking,
the daylight will be given back
minute by minute.

—*Florence Grossman*

A voice outside

All flesh is grass! said Nebuchadnezzar,
Sucking the bits from between his teeth:
And all birds are of a feather,
And I was everybody's emperor once.

Now I browse my way round the walls of that death
Where they watch, too scared of what I was to laugh
At what I am: my own dunce
And donkey, grazing the very stuff
Of truth, letting it pass
Back to its roots, like the other beasts.
But I'm Nebuchadnezzar nevertheless,
Myself for all time, king of outcasts.

And they fear me worse on all fours
With my facts, standing asleep in the dark
Like a horse,
With the sky dropping its spits all over my back.

—*David Paul*

Montana cat

Shine of shadow on a dark window-sill
Through lamp-lit glass, barely visible till
The mouth splits in a miaow of reproach, white fang,
Red tongue; a grin of here I am, let me in,
Animates the whole couching outline:

Black pads, lips, wax-black whiskers,
A genuine prince of darkness, sleek as a ribbon,
Demonic, determined wrap of affection,
Triumphant treader of cold paws into human warmth;
Or close coiled to the carpet
Total oblivion alert
At a breath or a pin-drop,
Drops back to total repose;
Rivals Napoleon for knowing what it wants,
And Zen for knowing when not to want,
Withdrawn into a haunt of non-thought:

From all his ancestry how did he select
This glossed integument of perfect jet?
Dogs run to liberal mongrel, cats revert
Through bar after bar sinister to pure-bred
Sudden Egyptian deity, jade-eyed,
Careless of where it came from, a personal infinite.

—*David Paul*

What have you done with your life?

What have you done with your life, what were you doing, say,
On the 9th of June 1971? . . . Minutiae . . .
The tiny down of a tit's feather caught shivering
On a bramble catches and holds the eye, distracts the wavering
Answer—Or allows you time? Time to think, remember.

Was it in June of that year, or not until September
I was in . . . I was . . . I . . . Hold it a minute. Yes! No,
Can't be sure, never kept a diary. But I see now
Why some have the Pepysian itch: write yourself down, record
Your daily digestion: acts: letters: whether your feet were sore,
What ballast of mood you were carrying, things undone
That you never did yet: days, weeks, months all gone
Into a compost, mapped with the snail-track shine
Of forgotten aims, laid-away dreams, a pot-pourri
With a now indefinable perfume.—Lord, what is man,
This breathing, bundling sentience? The tit's feather clings
And shivers, the bird that grew it a morsel in a hawk's stomach
Or minutely busy elsewhere with the unremembering urge
Of survival.

Memory's a moon that will go, come, and go
Plying its sly capricious pull on tides, thoughts and things,
Things . . . like clouds involved in the windy sky's vertigo.

—*David Paul*

Dance

Ground control

by Eva Resnikova

"I occupy myself with how not to interfere with the music," George Balanchine once said. To the pioneers of the modern dance, who were still defining their art in opposition to the ballet, the problem was just the reverse. Until dance liberated itself from its reliance on music, they felt, it would forever remain a "subsidiary art," in the words of John Martin, the *New York Times* critic and arch apologist for the modern dance. In his 1933 treatise *The Modern Dance*, Martin claims that for "the last several hundred years" dance has "quite legitimately excluded" itself from classification as a "major art" because it has existed "almost entirely within the boundaries" of another art—namely, music. Even if the choreographer chooses to treat his accompaniment as mere background music, for its "general mood and subject," the music still manages to win out in the end: "The mere fact that his background is more fixed than his own creative figures stultifies him. He must respect the musical phrase even though it is not at all in consonance with the dance phrase."

Martin in 1933 could not conceive of either a music or a dance that did not consist of phrases. In the mid-Sixties, however, we got both, and the modern-dance-versus-music problem appeared to have found its solution. Postmodern dance and minimalist music proved to be a cohabitation made in heaven. Rejected by the avant-garde musical establishment, which at this time was still deeply involved with serialism, the minimal-

ist composers were delighted to find allies in the downtown lofts of visual artists and experimental dancers. The music's steady beat and endlessly iterated rhythmic patterns and melodic fragments did not threaten to overpower even the most minimal of post-modern goings-on onstage, while the composers got more public performances of their music than they had dreamed possible.

In the early Seventies, this artistic romance between new music and dance was epitomized in the collaborations between the composer Steve Reich and the choreographer Laura Dean. Their respective groups, Steve Reich and Musicians and Laura Dean Dance Company, collaborated on a number of back-to-basics works with titles like *Square Dance*, *Circle Dance*, *Jumping Dance*, and *Walking Dance*. But in 1975, with the critical success of the symphonic-length *Drumming* at the Brooklyn Academy, the consensus was that Reich's music had become richer and more inventive than Dean's choreography. The following year, Dean began composing her own minimalist scores and changed the name of her company to Laura Dean Dancers and Musicians. Now celebrating its tenth anniversary, the company presented a week-long run at the Joyce Theatre in April of a program comprising three works: two revivals, *Tympani* (1980) and *Sky Light* (1982), and a New York premiere, *Magnetic* (1986), all with music, choreography, and costumes by Dean.

However one might feel about minimalist

music as a genre, differences do exist, in both style and skill, among its various exponents. This said, one can fairly safely conclude that Dean poses no threat to either of the two rebbes of the one-room minimalist school, Mr. Reich and Philip Glass. Hers is a sort of bare-bones minimalism, lacking the rhythmic ambiguities, the play of inner voices, the subtly shifting timbres and harmonic progressions—simple though they may be—that animate and enliven the best scores of Reich and Glass.

Dean's movement vocabulary is similarly constrained, though here one assumes a conscious artistic choice. Her steps include foot stampings and shufflings in place; back-stroking arms and hands beating invisible tomtoms; shoulder shimmying; simple jumps, kicks, and leg raises; hip-slinging shifts of weight from one leg to the other in cowboy shoot-out position; even, in *Magnetic*, a simple relevé-développé and a pirouette in relevé attitude, reflecting her recent work as a guest choreographer with ballet companies.

And then, of course, there is the spinning. The story of Dean's discovery of spinning has by now assumed the status of legend, the postmodern counterpart of Isadora's discovery of her solar plexus. In 1969, after dancing in the companies of Paul Taylor and Paul Sanasardo, Dean, aged twenty-four, abandoned dance and travelled to San Francisco to join a commune. Experiments with LSD coincided with her decision to take up dancing again. She rented a small, mirrorless storefront on Haight Street and locked herself in for several hours a day. After much soul-searching and many false starts, she began walking in circles and discovered the "kinesthetic joy" she had been seeking. Since she was so cramped for space, she began leaning inward during her circlings. Soon after, the spin was born.

Spinning has had a long history in ritual dance. Whirling dervishes, probably the best known practitioners of extended twirling, use it as a means of inducing in themselves certain spiritual states—loss of self, ecstasy, and similarly sublime dispositions. But as an element of theatrical dancing, spinning is

problematical. While to the spinee it is no doubt full of meaning, for the observer it's about as enlightening as watching someone praying. Dean now seems to be using spinning more as a decorative than an integral element in her choreography, just as she is using her recently acquired jetés and relevé attitudes as decorative elements rather than as a sign of a commitment to the classical ballet. Certainly her dancers did not look as if they were experiencing kinesthetic joy or any sort of spiritual enlightenment when they spun. They seemed rather cautious—perhaps even a bit sheepish, knowing what a cliché Dean's spinning has become. Their expressions were the inscrutable *de rigueur* postmodern deadpans that probably arose from the need to hide the fact that the dancers are counting like mad to themselves, getting no help from the music and terrified they'll lose count and throw the whole thing off.

Dean's vocabulary does not require much dance training of its executants, and her dancers don't have much to offer: the thumbnail bios in the Playbill reveal the usual grab bag of civic ballet companies and university dance departments. In *Sky Light*, when all the dancers were called upon to perform a jeté on the diagonal in turn, one girl managed a pretty fair split in the air, while some of the others hardly got off the ground. Dean seems to have little interest in any sort of unified performance style. But she has a great deal of interest in the precise execution of her intricate group patterns, which have become increasingly complex (even a leading critic with long experience in Dean-watching admitted to difficulty in deciphering some of the patterns in Dean's newest piece) and to this end has drilled her dancers to an almost frightening degree of perfection. The dichotomy between her *laissez-faire* attitude toward individual performance and her martinet's insistence on the group regimentation required to execute her inviolable patterns is one of the most disturbing aspects of Dean's work.

Dean retired gracefully from the stage a few years ago, when she was only fortyish.

Often the original impetus of a modern-dance company is lost or weakened when its founder-choreographer stops dancing. Paradoxically, Dean's retirement as a dancer has fully revealed the *raison d'être* of her company—a revelation that had been intimated by her decision to write her own music. Dean aims for total control over a group, and now she's got it: choreography, music, even costumes. Unison group movement has long been a part of all kinds of dancing, from the corps de ballet of *Swan Lake* to the Rockettes to Busby Berkeley. But Dean's use of this device is so rigidly applied and mechanistic, and so devoid of any sort of leavening humor or irony, that at times it seems as if she aspires to be the Leni Riefenstahl of postmodern dance.

It wasn't surprising that the audience at the Joyce responded so enthusiastically (in-

cluding whooping, the evening I was there). The pop elements derived from aerobics and disco—the heightened energy level and non-stop action; the shiny blue leotards and wailing synthesizers—have increased the accessibility of Dean's work. The repetitive choreography induces trancelike states that can be soothing after a hard day at the office. And then, toward the end, Dean wakes up the audience and works them up through facile coups de théâtres: a slowly descending curtain on a crescendo in the music (*Sky Light*); a darkening stage on a crescendo that cuts off an unresolved note in mid-phrase (*Tympani*); a stage full of furiously whirling dancers who stop suddenly in perfect unison (*Magnetic*). Only a critic who feels a professional obligation to remain alert at all times during the performance could be grumpy.

Langdon Quin

Recent Paintings June 2 - 26, 1987



Valley Landscape, Noqna, 1985, oil on canvas, 17 x 21½ inches

Robert Schoelkopf Gallery 50 W 57 NY 10019

A “guide” to popular culture?

by Martha Bayles

Good news for the White House. Despite all the criticism whined, barked, and whispered in recent months, there are still some Americans out there who think President Reagan is in charge. Not only do they see him snapping his imperialistic whip over the heads of the multinationals, they also see him stirring up popular ardor for imminent military interventions, and for the deployment of SDI. Most of all, they credit him with manipulating the mass media, especially television, for his own purposes. And they're not just talking about quips at press conferences. These folks see the president slipping subliminal pro-Star Wars messages into the interstices of automobile commercials. Just look at the latest high-tech sports-car ads, those mirror-bright fenders blurring into accelerated streaks of pure light! Don't they remind you of lasers? No wonder we're putty in the Great Communicator's hands.

The White House may well ask: Who are these true believers? They are the contributors to *Watching Television*, one of two inaugural volumes in a new series of books subtitled “A Pantheon Guide to Popular Culture.”¹ *Watching Television* is compiled

by Todd Gitlin, an associate professor of sociology and director of the mass-communications program at the University of California at Berkeley. Now that he has finished assembling this volume, Mr. Gitlin is proceeding with a new book about his true passion: the faded glories of the New Left. Back in 1970, he co-authored *Uptown: Poor Whites in Chicago*, a participant-observer study (with emphasis on “participant”) which lauded community organizing among down-and-out Appalachian migrants. Despite its strong political bias, the book contained compelling detail about its subjects' lives. But Mr. Gitlin has long since traded in the nitty-gritty for the nutty-glitzzy, making a name for himself since with two semi-coherent tracts blaming television for everything that offends his unfaded New Left sensibilities. *The Whole World Is Watching* (1980) deplored the way television news distorted and blunted the protests of the 1960s; and *Inside Prime Time* (1983) exposed the insidious ideological workings of the three major networks.

Clearly, Mr. Gitlin will not be available to write confidence-building speeches for the Reagan administration. As counted by Richard T. Marin of *The Washington Times*, there are eighty-five instances of Reagan-bashing in the book, or one every two and a half pages. Jonathan Yardley of *The Washington Post* remarked: “One does not have to admire either ‘Star Wars’ or Ronald Reagan to tire very quickly of the knee-jerk political

1 *Watching Television*, edited by Todd Gitlin, was published by Pantheon in January (248 pages, \$19.95 hardcover, \$9.95 paperback). The other volume in the “Pantheon Guide to Popular Culture” series, also published in January, is *Reading the News*, edited by Robert Karl Manoff and Michael Schudson (256 pages, \$19.95 hardcover, \$9.95 paperback).

posturing with which this collection is riddled.”

Consider the first contribution, an essay on network news by Daniel C. Hallin, professor of communication and political science at the University of California at San Diego. (Let us pass lightly over Mr. Gitlin’s introduction. Later, when we’re feeling stronger, we’ll return to the subject of his writing style.) Professor Hallin begins by offering examples of mild anti-Reagan criticism from CBS’s coverage of the 1985 Beirut hostage crisis. “The potential was there,” he writes, “for the administration to appear insensitive . . . or incompetent, or both.” But before a conservative can say “Reed Irvine,” Professor Hallin trots out evidence that in fact the press does not have a liberal bias. He cites phrases from the mouths of Dan Rather and Lesley Stahl which emphasize the “nationalism and the military-oriented patriotism of Ronald Reagan.” What are the phrases? Mr. Rather is quoted saying, “Suddenly, President Reagan and his fellow Americans find themselves under attack from different sides in a war against faceless enemies.” And Lesley Stahl said: “White House officials see a pattern of terrorism which they believe may be an attempt to test the will of President Reagan and the American people.” For Professor Hallin, these remarks reveal that journalists are “deeply ambivalent about political authority. They often treat the president as a self-serving politician . . . Yet the president also appears in television’s political dramas as the brave marshal who suffers with the town’s citizens and rides out to defend the town from the bad men.” It appears from Professor Hallin’s own phrasing that he sees no reputable way for journalists to support presidential leadership. And in the case of the hostage crisis, he regrets that CBS didn’t eschew the theme of “Americans under attack” in favor of the message that “military intervention in civil war doesn’t pay.”

Even the better essays in the collection mix their insights about television with a rigidly ideological attitude. In “Search for Yesterday,” for example, Ruth Rosen lucidly

analyzes how soap operas provide the illusion of community for socially isolated viewers—an analysis which could have been made at any time during the last thirty years. In the last few paragraphs, however, she cannot resist the urge to make it more “relevant” by inserting a couple of whacks at You Know Who.

Actually, there is one essay in the collection with a legitimate gripe against the Reagan administration. Tom Engelhardt, an editor at Pantheon, forces our unwilling gaze upon the pathetic spectacle of 1980s children’s television, and argues persuasively that its worst excesses stem from the deregulation efforts of Reagan-appointed FCC chairman Mark Fowler—the man who dismissed television as “. . . just another appliance. It’s a toaster with pictures.” Granted, the more tightly regulated children’s programming of the 1970s was nothing to crow about. Among other oddities, the networks began censoring the “violence” in old cartoons: we’d see Road Runner whiz off the cliff, legs whirring, but our tender eyes would be spared the sight of him plunging to his usual flattening fate. Yet today things are even worse, because deregulation has ushered in the age of television shows created primarily to sell toys. Instead of larking about with a tough old perennial like Road Runner, young boys today engage in mindless intergalactic warfare with ranks of GoBots, Transformers, Monster Minds, He-Men, Voltrons, Sectaurs, and Wheeled Warriors; while young girls learn the arts of emotional manipulation from saccharine tribes of Care Bears, My Little Ponies, Hugga Bunch Dolls, Rainbow Brites, Smurfs, Pound Puppies, and Charmkins. These ephemera are not even cartoon characters; they’re “licensed-character products” spawned in the brains of toy-corporation executives who value quantity over quality, disposability over longevity. Mr. Engelhardt does not need the extra cheap shots he takes at Reagan to succeed in damning them all with a holy, satirical vengeance.

Unfortunately, Mr. Engelhardt’s patches of satire provide the only comic relief in all

of *Watching Television*. Perhaps Mr. Gitlin forbade humor because, as Mark Crispin Miller argues in the final essay, television itself has begun to use irony and self-parody as a way of holding on to jaded viewers. Professor Miller, who directs the Film Studies Program in the writing seminars at Johns Hopkins University, offers an intriguing close-up history of the “Dad” figure in sitcoms from *Father Knows Best* to *The Cosby Show*. Some television critics (including this one) have praised Bill Cosby for re-asserting adult authority in a genre that has gradually, over the last twenty years, elevated children to a position of hip superiority over their un-hip elders. Professor Miller’s apt reply to such praise is that Dad Cosby gets his way only by acting like one of the kids—not the approach one would expect from Robert Young, Ozzie Nelson, or *Leave It To Beaver*’s Hugh Beaumont. A better title for Cosby’s show might be “Father Clowns Best.”

In spite of all the Reagan-bashing, there is much useful material in these essays by Rosen, Engelhardt, and Miller. Likewise the piece by Pat Aufderheide, cultural editor of *In These Times*, provides a valuable capsule account of the phenomenon of rock-music videos. And although she occasionally slips into the free-associative verbiage of Gitlin-style “cultural criticism,” she is to be commended for not letting it drown her argument.

The same cannot be said of Michael Sorkin, architecture critic for *The Village Voice*. Obviously Mr. Sorkin is impatient with the mundane task of dividing television entertainment into genres, to say nothing of evaluating individual programs. Instead he hunts for suggestive examples of how television is becoming a single, indivisible entity. Dissecting the anatomy of the on-air promotional campaign which preceded NBC’s 1985 movie about AIDS, *An Early Frost*, he notes that during the day of the broadcast the movie materialized “as commercial (that is, a self-contained unit appearing among other commercials), as interview, as ‘news’ about the interview, as ‘news’ about a related

interview, as commercial for a related broadcast, as ‘news’ about a related broadcast, and as part of the ‘conversational’ agenda of that day’s *Today* show.” For Mr. Sorkin, this exercise in self-hype proves that the line between programs and commercials is wavering, and that the distinction between news and entertainment is becoming meaningless.

Not that he puts it that way. Regrettably, his explanations partake of the Gitlin maxim: the more sobering the point, the more inebriated the language. Like Mr. Gitlin’s, Mr. Sorkin’s method of media analysis seems to be to vegetate in front of his television screen until he feels ill, and then to run from the room and verbalize into his word processor. Here is a typical outpouring: “The main thrust of television’s simulation is not yet directed primarily to the invention of a culture predicated on the prosthetic construction of the human subject. Its simulations serve primarily as an implement for the creation of continuities across the range of broadcast quanta, to further establish the principle of equality among images. Simulation is presently absorbed not with a structure of certainties but with a radical agenda of destabilization.”

In other words, television is becoming homogenized. And the implication is not just that Mr. T may be turning into a licensed-character product. It is also that TV may be altering the way people think.

To give Mr. Gitlin credit, he acknowledges the importance of this question. His introduction sounds a clarion: “As long as television is among us, let us at least scrutinize it for what it reveals about our whole society, about the institutions where power is lodged, about the nature of life—including television watching—in the late twentieth century.” The call seems all the more urgent because, according to Mr. Gitlin’s introduction, precious little research has ever been done on the mass media. His survey of the scholarly literature comprises a single paragraph and four footnotes—one citing an article by Mr. Gitlin. In the next paragraph he implies that, aside from a few silly English professors elevating television

shows to the level of literature (the Popular Culture Association), nothing significant has been written about television in the last thirty years. He does not mention McLuhan.

It's fashionable nowadays to dismiss Marshall McLuhan's cryptic utterances as intellectual three-card monte. But he did have a few seminal ideas, which is a lot more than can be said for Todd Gitlin. Because of McLuhan, self-respecting professors of communications must now ask their students whether or not the medium is the message; and if the students don't understand, the professors must patiently explain that once upon a time there was no such thing as television. One such professor is Gary Gumpert, the chairman of the communications arts and sciences department at Queens College. In his new book, *Talking Tombstones & Other Tales of the Media Age*,² Professor Gumpert probes exactly the sort of McLuhanesque puzzles overlooked by Gitlin's political high-rollers: Can art works retain value in an age of near-perfect mechanical reproduction? Can television news stay credible in an age of invisible editing? Can sportsmanship survive in an age of instant-replay officiating? Can public space have dignity in an age of tape boxes, Walkmans, Acoustiguide, and MUZAK? Can live performances be appreciated in an age of flawless recording? Can thinking prevail in an age of information overdose? Can face-to-face social bonds thrive in an age of electronic networking?

To Professor Gumpert's credit, he does not succumb to the apocalyptic visions looming behind each of these questions. His approach is calm, workmanlike, and even-handed in the manner of a genial teacher trying to stimulate discussion without taking sides. If he drones on a bit, the sound is welcome after Mr. Gitlin's heavings. Mr. Gitlin's four footnotes notwithstanding, there have been several attempts in recent years to fathom the conflict between "print culture" and "video culture"—to use the

educators' shorthand. Among the best is *Amusing Ourselves To Death*,³ a lively attack on television by Neil Postman, professor of communication arts and sciences at New York University. Professor Postman neither ignores other people's research nor indulges in irrelevant polemics; and his impassioned voice will almost convince you that the printing press is on its last legs.

Still, it's impossible to succumb to panic when the death of literacy is predicted by a writer as disciplined as Mr. Postman. For a real scare, let us return one last time to the writing of Todd Gitlin. Michael Sorkin may run from one room to another in order to verbalize, but I suspect that Mr. Gitlin does it all in the same place, simultaneously gorging himself on television and disgorging his effusions onto the keyboard. Each new TV image that flashes before his eyes gets tossed into the churning mass of his text and connected with all the other images and ideas by associations which are not free so much as imprisoned and tortured.

Take, for example, Mr. Gitlin's own contribution, an essay linking the "thirty-second utopia" of a certain type of turbo-speed car commercial with various America myths: rugged individualism, man's conquest of nature, moral rectitude, and the quick technofix. None of these notions are especially original, but Mr. Gitlin tries hard to hawk them as his own new and improved insights. Faced with a car advertisement that doesn't conform to his hyperbole, he simply works it over till it fits: "The Dodge Revolution spot with which we began takes the high symbolic road, but this genre's eerie thrusting is by no means the only striking image of the car in the mid-eighties . . . [I]n one spot for the Chevrolet Celebrity Eurosport, the sleek woman driver fondles her car—something none of her male equivalents would be caught dead doing. She reminds us that her streamlined machine is culturally coded as phallus, or pet . . ."

2 *Talking Tombstones*, by Gary Gumpert; Oxford University Press, 206 pages, \$17.95.

3 *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, by Neil Postman, was published by Viking in 1985 (184 pages, \$15.95).

Or if a commercial departs drastically from his scenario, Mr. Gitlin simply reverts to the sensibilities of the counterculture: "The high disposer of income beloved by advertisers does not live by getaway fantasies alone. And so there are other spots which toss out associations in more prosaic and "realistic" fashion . . . In one spot, we see a happy-go-yuppie female driver, with white blouse and tie. Cut to a boy-meets-girl flirtation. Cut to a man in glasses and a suit, Clark Kent as junior partner, flipping a football to a small boy, presumably his son. Flirtation and family images go by so fast, it's as if the two have fused into the image of the ideal upscale couple who've worked out

so well—perhaps gone through the right counseling—they still know how to like sex."

The 1960s will never die, as long as people like Todd Gitlin are around to denounce the sexual repression of the "uptight" white middle class.

It's disturbing enough when college students suffer from this sort of cultural bulimia, and we suspect that they can't construct a coherent argument because they've spent their lives watching television. But it's truly frightening when a major publishing house asks one of their fellow sufferers to edit a "guide to popular culture." Maybe the tube really is out to murder the book.

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Esteban Vicente at eighty-four

by Elizabeth Frank

Next January, the painter Esteban Vicente will turn eighty-five. This event ought to be cause for celebration in the New York art world; yet, to my knowledge, not a single major museum has made the slightest gesture toward commemorating the thirty-seven-year achievement of the Spanish-born artist, who remains, along with de Kooning, Pousette-Dart, and Motherwell, one of the last working members of the New York School's First Generation. Indeed, it's a curious fact that while Vicente has important works in the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Guggenheim, and the Whitney, they are rarely shown. MOMA, for instance, has two superb paintings, but one, from the James Thrall Soby Bequest, has never been shown, and the other has not been seen since it was included in "The New American Painting and Sculpture: The First Generation," in 1969. I have seen Vincents in the basements of MOMA, the Met, and the Guggenheim, and the Whitney's storage annex, and I have seen them in some of the city's major corporate and private collections. But short of flying to Scottsdale, Arizona, last March, to see "Esteban Vicente: Selected Paintings 1952-1986," at the Yares Gallery, anyone desiring a major overview of Vicente's singular career would seek in vain for catalogues from museum retrospectives, for there have been none. None, that is, until recently; for that, however, he would have to go to Madrid, where, this spring, from April

24 to June 15, the Fundación Banco Exterior is sponsoring "Esteban Vicente: 1925-1986," the first major Vicente retrospective ever, at its Sala de Exposiciones on the Paseo de la Castellano. Organized by Vicente Todoli, a young art historian and curator at the Institute Julio Gonzalez in Valencia, with a catalogue that includes essays by both Spanish and American critics, the exhibition reveals the enormous gulf between the Vicente who lived in Madrid, Paris, and Barcelona in the Twenties and Thirties, and the Vicente who, arriving in New York in 1936, worked in virtual obscurity all through the Forties until, in 1950, Meyer Schapiro and Clement Greenberg put him in the "Talent 1950" show at Sam Kootz, launching a career that continues to flourish nearly forty years later.

Indeed, the story told by the Madrid exhibition is not that of blazing youthful virtuosity, but rather an odyssey of painstaking self-discovery. By 1950 Vicente was in his late forties, with a long life in art already behind him. Born in 1903 in a small Castilian town, he was raised in Madrid, where he spent three years studying sculpture at the Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando and two years afterward actually working as a sculptor before abruptly renouncing sculpture for painting, which he had discovered he preferred for its immediacy and directness, and for the chance it gave him to work with color. Yet, having made this change, he also discovered that Spain

offered few directions for a young painter. The weight of the past (his studio was just across the street from the Prado) seemed suffocating, paralyzing, while at the same time there hadn't been a great Spanish painter since Goya. Modernism beckoned, more a rumor than a reality, for it was clear that the twentieth century had not yet arrived in Madrid, where works by the post-Impressionists, Cézanne, and Picasso were available in reproduction only. Vicente, however, soon became friendly with some of the young poets later known as members of "The Generation of 1925," among them Juan Ramón Jiménez, Rafael Alberti, Vicente Aleixandre, Pedro Salinas, and Jorge Guillén, and had drawings reproduced in one of their numerous small literary magazines. In 1926 he had his first one-man show, of abstract paintings, at the Ateneo in Madrid, and received a review, with a reproduction of one of the paintings, in Ortega y Gasset's *La Revista de Occidente*. He did not continue with abstraction, however; as curator Todoli notes, while Cubism, or what they knew of it, was important to the young painters in Madrid, the poetry of their friends had a more immediate effect on their work. The works of the "poetic" painters—and Vicente was one of them—were so termed because they sought to create "visual equivalents of the poetry of the Generation of 1925. Both poets and painters shared a strong aestheticism reflected in their tendency to stylize or de-realize life and everything human, a tendency to deform natural objects and a negative vision of the sentimental, the passionate and the real."¹

Vicente knew, by the mid-Twenties, that if he stayed in Madrid he would never enter the twentieth century. In 1927 he left for Paris, where he eked out a living retouching photographs and working on theater sets for the Folies-Bergère. He exhibited in the 1928 and 1930 Salons des Surindépendants, spent

six months in London with Augustus John and his circle, knew a variety of artists, including Dufy and Max Ernst, and suffered profound discouragement. He spent an afternoon with Picasso in the rue La Boétie studio, surprised and gratified when his older countryman said he was familiar with the article about Vicente's Ateneo show in *La Revista de Occidente*. Picasso urged him not to return to Spain, and explained that when he himself had left Paris in discouragement, he found it twice as hard to readjust when he came back. But Paris was just too inhospitable at the time, and Vicente moved to Barcelona for a year, where he met Miró, had two dealers, Merli and Syra, a show at the Galería Dalmau, and an article written about him by the Catalan art critic Sebastian Gasch.

The French landscapes and Barcelona street, café, and port scenes he painted around this time were still decidedly "poetic," with simplified forms, pale tonal washes, and a certain detached, melancholy atmosphere to them, with only a hint of the structural rigor of his later work. In 1931 Vicente returned to Paris, and remained for another three years. He spent 1935 in Ibiza, painting bright, firm, Impressionist-influenced landscapes, and then, in 1936, within weeks of the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, sailed to the United States, with the blessing of the Loyalists, for whom he served as Vice-Consul in Philadelphia from 1937 to 1939.

Vicente had a modest and immediate success in New York, with two figurative exhibitions, in 1937 and 1939, at the Kleeman Gallery, the first warmly reviewed in *Artnews*, where a dark, sober, very Spanish double portrait, *Catalina and Her Grandmother*, was reproduced. Another show, of portraits and figures, at Bonestall Gallery in 1941, met with favor. But for the next nine years, Vicente stopped showing, and destroyed much of his work. He was suffering a long crisis of direction which could be solved, he felt, only in private. By the late Forties, however, he knew where his work was going. He had come to know Gorky, de Kooning, Pollock, Rothko, Kline, Newman, and critic

1 Vicente Todoli, "Esteban Vicente and the Generation of 1925," in the exhibition catalogue, *Esteban Vicente: 1925-1986* (Madrid: Fundación Banco Exterior, 1987).

Harold Rosenberg, and had found, within the language of new American abstraction, an idiom all his own. For him, “all-overness” meant, in the paintings he showed in the early Fifties at the Peridot Gallery, a brilliant shallow field of planes and sharp linear accents echoing and re-echoing each other in an austere Cubist rectilinearity. A painting such as *Number One* (1951), seen at the Met in 1981 in “An American Choice: The Muriel Kallis Steinberg Newman Collection,” seems far less “gestural” than structural, its restlessly brushed, crudely edged forms cohering within an understated Cubist grid. The handling and composition, which reflect to a certain extent de Kooning’s influence, nevertheless mark a unique sensibility obeying an interior sense of order at once elegant and tough-minded.

Throughout the later Fifties, in paintings and collages (which he began making in 1949) shown at Charles Egan, Rose Fried, and Leo Castelli, Vicente’s work changed repeatedly and organically. By 1956, in a painting like *Number 4*, which can be seen by request at MOMA, Vicente was placing colored rectangles in quirky intervals within a simple, thickly painted monochromatic field, beginning to search for a paradoxical luminosity within the opacities and scumbles of a rich painterliness. By 1960, when he painted *Tyr*, a beautiful painting in rich browns and ochres, now in the Whitney collection, shapes had opened up, and become both more jagged and irregular and more sensuous, as Vicente was working his way out of the Cubist grid. During numerous shows at André Emmerich, in the Sixties and early Seventies, Vicente turned to large curved forms, often overlapping and enclosing each other to suggest sculptural, even biomorphic space. In 1967-68, while teaching at Princeton, he began to paint with an air compressor, convinced, after an initial reluctance, that the luminosity he wanted could be obtained in no other way. Extraordinary things happened when Vicente started spraying. On the one hand, edges seemed to disappear; on the other, compositions became at once landscape-like and architectural.

In a painting such as *Space and Time* (1971), at the Guggenheim, floating, diffuse, softened color works in concert with a powerful and simple search for horizontal and vertical relationships which once again evoke Cubist structure in an illusionistic space.

It was Vicente who, in 1950, was virtually the first artist to move to a studio on Tenth Street—a studio he still maintains. He subsequently persuaded de Kooning to share a floor with him, an arrangement lasting many years. He was elected a voting member of The Club, and although he was never interested in public speaking or participating in panels (he has always preferred to be, as he puts it, “in the audience”), he formed friendships with Philip Guston, Ad Reinhardt, William Bazotes, Elaine de Kooning, George Spaventa, Philip Pavia, Ibram Lassaw, David Hare, and others. Thomas B. Hess included him in his groundbreaking book, *Abstract Painting: Background and American Phase*, in 1951, where he cited Vicente’s relation to the Cubist tradition.

Certainly Vicente must be seen as a relative latecomer to the heroic First Generation; but in its ranks he just as assuredly belongs. Born the same year as Gottlieb and Rothko, he was, like Hofmann, de Kooning, Rothko, Gorky, and Tworckov, an immigrant who could only become what he was meant to be in post-World War II New York, when, by no means a youngster, he was free to assimilate and reject, on his own terms, exactly what in the art of the previous half-century spoke most directly to him. Surrealism did not interest him—with the exception of de Chirico’s early work—and neither did Expressionism. Despite his close friendship with Harold Rosenberg, he was never an “Action Painter,” and never glorified the self as a mythic or archetypal force, although to this day he has a deep Spanish reverence for the irrational, the tragic, and fate. Matisse and Mondrian, with their passionate detachment and intellectual devotion to structure and color, were of utmost importance to him. When he resurfaced in 1950 as an abstract artist, it was not as a formal

innovator, a title to which he has never made claim, but as an interpreter of new conventions, with a profoundly conscious and lyrical grasp of the logic of high modernism's roots in Cubism, and a sense of possibility funded by Matisse's color and Mondrian's stark restraint.

In addition—and this is perhaps the central irony of Vicente's career—he had, at last, and only as an American modernist, come into possession of his Spanish inheritance. In May, 1958, in an *Artnews* article on Juan Gris, Vicente wrote:

Apollinaire called Cubism a Realist Art. And Gris took this form to express a Realism that was his by his cultural background and tradition. Realism runs through all manifestations of art in Spain. In and through the work of Fray Luis de León, St. Teresa, Cervantes, Velázquez, Goya, as in and through that of Picasso, is found a concept of profound reality—the reality that springs from the play of the intellectual faculties and a sense for the material aspect of the world, a sense that is the core of their artistic expression. And in painting it is essential, it is elemental, to have this sense of the material aspect of the world.

Like so many artists' statements, this one conceals a self-portrait. Vicente's relationship to Abstract Expressionism resembles that of Gris to Cubism, in that both artists found within conventions recently established by others the possibilities for individual expression so compelling and so strong as to make those conventions seem born anew. Vicente's work emphatically participates in the Realism he discerns in Gris. He has always adhered to the material facts of painting—to color-soaked canvas and paper, to brushmarks and sprayed flecks, torn and jagged edges, charcoal's smudge and contour—not as signs of his presence and activity, but as metaphors for the inescapable physicality of experience, serenely acknowledging both desire and mortality in the play of illusion and fact. The deliberately human scale of his work, its simplicity, and its astounding intensity of color have often

been called, with just a touch of myopic disparagement, "European," but they are Spanish through and through, and profoundly so. The primacy of abstract structure over all hints of poetic subject, the decision to work within a limited range of colors, the painterly, yet sculptural quality of his forms proclaim his affinities with Velázquez, Zurbarán, Goya, and, of course, Gris. In the early Forties, before the emergence of the New York School, the German émigré art historian Oskar Hagen named the *estilo desornamentado* as the fundamental characteristic of Spanish art, describing it as "the universal desire for a simple captivating naturalism stripped of ornamented trimmings and free form affectation."² If there is a continuity between the Vicente of 1925 and the Vicente of 1950 and beyond, it is that he has from the beginning, by temperament and intuition, been committed to a "disornamented" art, free of fanciful elaboration, grandiosity, and high drama.

With their atmospheric, depthless color and their edges at once sharp and melting, Vicente's spray paintings of the last twenty years have at times been compared to Rothkos. But as Vicente Todoli points out, "Vicente was not concerned with the Sublime as Rothko was, but with the Beautiful, not with the big but with the intimate, not with chaos but with order, not with the release of the forces of the unconscious but with intuitive control, not with passion but with emotion, not with drama but with tension."

Still painting, Vicente is, at eighty-four, simply one of the best artists in America. He has taught generations of American artists, and includes among former students Brice Marden, Dorothea Rockburne, Chuck Close, and Susan Crile. He has never been a careerist. He will speak his mind, when asked, but prefers to keep his own counsel. He insists on working within his limitations. Since 1979 he has been showing regularly at the

2 *Patterns and Principles of Spanish Art*, by Oskar Hagen; University of Wisconsin Press, 1943.

Gruenebaum Gallery, and has a devoted following among artists and collectors, although he has been largely ignored by what I suppose must wearily be called the movers and shakers of the museum world. We live in a culture that worships success, no matter how premature, and clamors for greatness, but goes deaf, dumb, and blind in the presence of quiescent excellence and sustained, vital maturity. In many of our museum retrospectives we reward ambition and ego in the young, canonize the middle-aged into all but petrification, and historicize individual achievement into so many movements, generations, and categories that little remains of that ineffable quiddity of feeling, taste, and intelligence which truly creates an artist's identity. If culture—and I mean by this what used to be called, without embarrassment or irony, high culture—is to survive in New York, and to continue to produce what Clement Greenberg once called “its infinity of aspects, its luxuriance, its large comprehension,” then surely we have been too content to appraise achievement according to narrow criteria and oft-repeated formulas.

Madrid has awakened finally from its long fascist sleep, and in Vicente has understandably found a native link to the New York School, the freedom and imaginative vitality of which it was so cruelly and so long denied. But as the Spanish critics who have written about the show acknowledge, Vicente is an American painter, more ours than theirs, and it should not have to be necessary to go to Spain to see an Esteban Vicente retrospective. He is alive and working as steadily and passionately as ever, and his current paintings and collages exhibit no signs of age. To render homage to an artist of unquestionable merit is not to give him something which he lacks, but to nourish ourselves with that mystery only he possesses. We have all grown up with the myth of the painter who works on into old age, madly in love with his art, revealing powers unsuspected in youth; yet, when such a figure lives among us, asking nothing of us, we grab the nearest thirty-two-year-old and give him a major retrospective. And it is ourselves, of course, and not the old master, who lose out, in the end.

Jasper's seasons

by Jed Perl

The Four Seasons is one of art's primal subjects. It's attracted painters ancient and modern, East and West, and the mythological and literary references that have piled around it over the centuries have yielded some of the most deeply layered and urbane images in the history of art. But the appeal of the Seasons theme remains, at heart, very simple—something anyone can understand. The Seasons is about the changes that overtake the planet and all of us who live on it. It's about the leaden gray mood of the dead of winter; the first rush of warmth and expansiveness that arrives in February or March; the heavy luxuriance of high summer; and that clarifying of the sky to a clear, deep, flat blue that signals the coming of fall.

The first—and absolutely damning—thing to be said about Jasper Johns's new Seasons, which was at Leo Castelli in February,¹ is that Johns has been unable to evoke four (or even two) different moods. Johns's *Spring*, *Summer*, *Fall*, and *Winter* are covered in a bluish- or greenish-gray scum. They have the same rhythmic intervals; they all look and feel the same. And it's not as if Johns is trying to tell us something about the eradication of natural rhythms in the modern

world. His four paintings are full of conventional little seasonal signs—snow for winter, rain for spring, things like that. He wants to produce images of growth and death and change; but he seems reluctant to make any radical shifts in color or scale. His Seasons are muffled, well-mannered, self-consciously “artistic.”

The four paintings, each vertical and seventy-five by fifty inches, were hung together on the south wall of Castelli's ample 420 West Broadway space. Johns's paintings weren't an aggressive presence in the gallery, the way some of David Salle's and Julian Schnabel's oversized paintings have been in recent years. On the other hand, they didn't look provocatively small, the way Johns's paintings did in his last show, in 1984, in Castelli's barnlike Greene Street space. The Seasons had no presence at all. Each is just a jumble of tics and tricks, held together by the device of regular vertical divisions of the canvas. *Summer* and *Winter* are split into two equal sections; *Spring* and *Fall* in three, the two side ones each half the width of the central one. There may be an idea of moving from images that fit the frame in *Winter* and *Summer* to transitional images in *Spring* and *Fall*. If so, it's like watching the segments of a filmstrip wind across the rectangle of the canvas. A shakily edged silhouette of the artist reappears from painting to painting, as do a black disk, a handprint, some pieces of pottery, a ladder, a rope, and excerpts from

1 Jasper Johns's “The Seasons” was on view at Leo Castelli's 420 West Broadway gallery from January 31 through March 7. The catalogue, by Judith Goldman, is also entitled *The Seasons* and was published by Leo Castelli Gallery (23 pages, \$25).

Johns's earlier work. The paintings are overcrowded, particularly in their lower halves, as if everything had sifted down through the force of gravity. There's no depth, just the overlapping of odds and ends on a pictorial bulletin board, presided over by the self-portrait of the artist as a faceless nonentity. In the early Seventies, Leo Steinberg praised the space in the paintings of Johns and Rauschenberg with the altogether accurate (and to my mind devastating) term, "flatbed picture plane." Johns is still composing paintings on this plan, where "the surface stood for the mind itself—dump, reservoir, switching center." And he's still coming up with the kind of art-gallery smash hit that marked his debut, also at Castelli, back in 1958.

The appearance of the Johns Seasons was accompanied by a sort of instant iconographic key, in Judith Goldman's Castelli catalogue essay. She describes borrowings from Johns's own earlier work, as well as "the Isenheim Altarpiece [by Grünewald]; a Swiss road sign with a bilingual warning of falling ice; the *Mona Lisa*; George Ohr pots; and a trick English vase, the sides of which form profiles of Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip." The biggest debt in the Seasons, though, is said to be to Picasso, and especially to *The Minotaur Moves his House*. Apparently Johns was attracted to this 1936 Picasso, in which the Minotaur pulls along his belongings in a down-at-the-heels cart, because Johns himself had just moved to a new home—a townhouse, on Manhattan's East Side. You can see that Johns has put bits and pieces of this and other Picassos in his new paintings; but his sense of Picasso is so unresonant, so flat, that he seems not to be borrowing from Picasso so much as he's suffocating him.

The Minotaur series isn't totally satisfactory Picasso, but it does have a remarkable energy that derives from the way Picasso infuses classical mythology with a kitschy sexual dimension. His macho minotaurs, often juxtaposed with languorous ladies, exist somewhere between the (perhaps inadvertently) uproarious neoclassic pornography

of Ingres's *Jupiter and Thetis* and the Tarzan-Jane pulp of Hollywood. *The Minotaur Moves his House* is classical myth with a cartoonish edge—it's a bit like a Picasso version of TV's Fred Flintstone leaving in a huff after a tiff with his wife. What Johns can't see in Picasso is the instinct for caricature that brings the classical imagery to life. When Johns borrows the Minotaur's cart from Picasso but not the Minotaur himself, he's losing the human interest—and the life force—of the original.

It comes as no surprise that Johns totally misses the pop zing of Thirties Picasso. Johns's whole career has been based on the idea that you have to be sanctimonious about popular American life—about the beer cans and flags and elementary-school-room maps—in order to turn it into Art. Johns despises whatever vigor popular culture really has; why else would he treat it with such snootiness? And now, by taking up a great high-art theme, the Seasons, he's proving that he can be a snob on a really exalted plane. He's taken the life out of the Four Seasons; he's doing a Seasons for prestige. When Poussin painted his *Spring*, with Adam and Eve in the juiciest green garden of them all, he spoke for everyone who's ever fallen asleep in the grass on a gorgeous May afternoon and felt they'd never get up again. Johns paints the Seasons like a man who's never been outside his studio; he has the audacity (or is it stupidity?) to set a Seasons cycle *indoors*.

Johns's Seasons are an interesting episode in the history of Pop Art, which has by now become a critical and academic industry all its own. As with Warhol, Rauschenberg, and the rest, Johns achieved fame very young, and a pressing question since then has been a career question—how to keep the public interested. It must be gratifying to find your own early work garnering record-breaking auction prices and becoming the subject of elaborate art-historical analyses, but everyone wants to feel that what they're doing now is important, too. Warhol solved the problem by more or less quitting art and

becoming a gossip-page phenomenon of unprecedented proportions; Rauschenberg seems to have accepted the fact that no one takes anything he's done in the last twenty years seriously and gone off on a prolonged international arts-and-crafts goodwill tour. Johns's stroke of genius has been to realize that rather than waiting for the march of time to turn your current work into history, you can just junk up your current work with so many art-historical references—including references to your own earlier work—that people will respond to the paintings as if they're art history already. Johns's Seasons show was a hit because it satisfied an audience that believes aesthetic experience is a form of historical experience. Johns is doing what the appropriationists do—he's quoting images from the recent and distant past, without really getting involved in them

emotionally. He's even appropriated the idea of being an Old Master. The wunderkind of Pop has, supposedly, grown up.

These past few months have been thin, art-gallery-wise. Competence, intelligence, ingeniousness are much in evidence; but almost everywhere one feels the inability of the artist to really engage the audience. Artists don't seem to be attuned either to a sense of the present (which is different from fashion) or to a sense of the past (which is different from academicism). Important new art comes about when a tradition reaches beyond itself, when a tradition begins to yearn toward and enter the present. It's the promise of that past-into-present leap that keeps us going to galleries. Johns seems to have many people convinced that he's made the leap. I say his feet are stuck to the ground.

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Danger and misery on Broadway

by *Fernanda Eberstadt*

Like some rare alignment of the stars, the two plays which have captivated this season's Broadway theatergoers are both British adaptations of great French novels. These two masterpieces are Choderlos de Laclos's *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* (1782) and Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* (1862): each provides an illuminating contrast to the other in its original, if not in its current Broadway incarnation.

In manner, philosophy, scale, and intent, two works could not be more different, so that the eighty years which lie between their publication—in which occurred the French Revolution, the Terror, the rise and fall of Napoleon, the realignment of Europe, and the restoration of Empire—would appear to have brought about a transformation of sensibility and belief every bit as total and irreversible as the technological transformations of our own age.

Les Misérables, written over the course of several decades and completed in the exile to which the social democrat Victor Hugo was consigned for his opposition to Louis Napoleon, is a literary Colossus of a very peculiar sort. Running (in its abbreviated English version) to 1,230 pages and awash with extended discursions (books within the book, really) on the Battle of Waterloo, the development of cloistered religious orders, or the science of street slang, the novel charts the moral regeneration of a criminal named Jean Valjean. Valjean is a kind of Christianized Coriolanus in chains, an es-

caped convict who over the years redeems himself by the sheer will of an austere virtue, becoming the millionaire mayor and benefactor of a happy factory town of his own founding. Yet Valjean is nonetheless condemned to perpetual hiding and flight by a cruelly "legalistic" society, as personified by his obsessed pursuer, the police inspector Javert. Beyond this, *Les Misérables* is the tale of a father's transcendent and all-consuming love for his (adopted) daughter, and Hugo is at once realistic and sublime in his depiction of how the rather grim Valjean, an animal, a fugitive, a master of disguise, is transformed by his tender and jealous guardianship of the orphan Cosette.

The novel's flaws are writ large: *Les Misérables* is voluptuously gothic and overblown, shamelessly sentimental, heavy on philosophizing and didactics, riddled with improbable coincidences and grotesque twists of fate, and overladen with lists, maps, battle records, grandiose summations of an age, and discourses on the beneficial influences of compulsory free education.

As a depicter of character, Hugo frankly rejoices in type, in portraits of pure good and unalloyed evil: his villains are unmitigatedly blackhearted, his innocents winged and haloed. Yet for all its broad and exaggerated obviousness, *Les Misérables* is the noble, thrilling, and profoundly affecting work of a large and powerful imagination, fired by the author's own fervent and highly individual brands of Christianity and political liberalism.

All these literary qualities which have made *Les Misérables* the delight of generations of French schoolboys conspire to make the novel a natural candidate for the theater. So it is that this season has brought us, by way of Paris, London, and Washington, D.C., a three-hour musical of *Les Misérables*, written by two Frenchmen, Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schönberg, directed by the Royal Shakespeare Company's former director Trevor Nunn, and produced by Cameron Mackintosh (the last two are veterans of the long-playing wonder-show *Cats*).

The musical *Les Misérables* at the Broadway Theatre, which has enjoyed a mixed critical reception and furious popular success, is at least partially faithful to the spirit of Victor Hugo's epic, reproducing with great enthusiasm the novel's crusading rage against an unjust society which turns men into criminals. As Trevor Nunn observes, "[The book] asks, what are you prepared to do about change? And the stance of the musical is the same." His co-director John Caird adds, "It [is] exhilarating to find an entertainment that [is] really *about* something—about right and wrong, the nature of justice, the battle of good and evil."

Yet funnily enough, the musical *Les Misérables* isn't really *about* anything, but is a rather pallid and truncated assemblage of flat tunes with syrupy lyrics, a kind of oversized skit without compelling characters, inner drama, or historical propulsion, in which each scene is merely slapped onto the one before, as unfurnished excuse for songs which seem to have been borrowed from other musicals. (The exceptions to this regnant insipidness are the rollicking scoundrels Monsieur and Madame Thenardier, played with great gusto by Leo Burmester and Jennifer Butt.)

Although the musical quite effectively inflates to its main event the student-led revolution of 1832, it proves unable to convey Hugo's deeper theme: fallen man's struggle and hard-won mastery over his own sinful nature. For despite the thrilling pomp and glory which makes *Les Misérables* the best of

adventure stories, Hugo's true drama is an inward one. The work's success depends upon our appreciation of Jean Valjean's arduous and painful self-regeneration against all outward odds, and upon our recognition, at *Les Misérables'* conclusion, that we have witnessed the death, in Hugo's words, of "a figure of indescribable stature, supremely great and gently humble in his immensity, the convict transformed into Christ."

How different is Nunn and Caird's *Les Misérables*! Although the Irish singer Colm Wilkinson delivers a Valjean who is as doughty as a burro, this element of Christian self-conquest is altogether missing from the musical. For the battle-in-the-soul, which in Hugo's novel culminates in Valjean's giving up to her lover the daughter he loves above life, the musical substitutes as its validating climax the student revolution at the barricades, an uprising romantically abortive and afloat with vague slogans about "a new world" or "the future." This glib and mindlessly upbeat externalization of Hugo's moral tells us much in turn about the doleful career of liberal sentiment from the nineteenth century to our own day.

The opportunity having been missed to stage a powerful emotional drama acted out by men larger than life, Nunn and Caird's *Les Misérables*, with its massive machinery of revolving stage, peasant crowds, and Parisian tenements-turned-barricades, with its dwarfed characters and saccharine songs, offers instead a kind of generic spectacular, reminiscent not of Hugo's novel but of other, more inspired extravaganzas like *Jesus Christ Superstar* or *Evita*, an assembly-line spectacular that is large, expensive, and vapid.

Both in its original state and in its current theatrical incarnation, *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* is quite a different kettle of fish. If *Les Misérables* is a work one might wish one's children to take heart in, *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* is a novel to be kept under lock and key, that even today, in Jean Giraudoux's words, "gives us an impression of danger" and "seems to require a label on its cover reserving it for external use only."

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Virtually the sole literary production of a provincial French officer, a Jacobin, and later, a general under Napoleon, Laclos's novel charts in epistolary form the sexual gamesmanship of the Marquise de Merteuil and the Vicomte de Valmont, two seasoned and cold-blooded aristocrats who plot and execute the seduction of innocents sheerly from love of mastery and contempt for virtue, and from a kind of mortal passion for each other which can only be realized in other people's arms. Exquisitely economical in its narrative, stunning in its psychological shrewdness, *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* moves ineluctably toward a general destruction that leaves the reader sick at heart. This jeweled and dreadful masterpiece of libertine manners, set exclusively in the boudoir and the opera box, has been converted into a play by Christopher Hampton, performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company, and transported to the Music Box on Broadway after a wildly successful London run.

The Royal Shakespeare Company's visual depiction of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* is crys-

talline. The set is reduced to bare bones: billowing white curtains, white upholstered chaises longues, a tall slim pillar of ashwood and a tall ashwood-slatted screen to conceal a succession of eavesdropping lovers. These features, combined with a crew of blond and pink-and-white actors outfitted in white and with lighting that bathes the stage in a pale yellowy luster, give *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* the climate of an English drama unfolding in some imaginary and timeless colony, in the India or West Indies of a Merchant-Ivory film—an airy luminosity which, though dreamier than Laclos's sharp realism, cleanses the play of any hint of the musty preciousness or heightened artificiality that might cling to an eighteenth-century novel of letters.

Director Howard Davies's *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* is performed as a straightforwardly modern comedy of manners, whose running double entendres and epigrams on the commerce between the sexes are delivered with an icy precision and flexing of the dimples that invariably brings the house down.

The acting is splendid: Lindsay Duncan plays the Marquise de Merteuil as a deliciously fluttery and ogling Lady Macbeth, and Alan Rickman makes a petulant Valmont goaded by professional vanity into concealing from his pitiless co-conspiratrix an increasing loss of appetite and nerve for a game that requires hefty portions of both commodities. Suzanne Burden gives a tight-laced and somber dignity to the fall of the prudish Presidente de Tourvel, whose ravishment is Valmont's ultimate conquest and undoing, while the rosy and babyish Beatrice Edney heartily conveys the native lustiness and duplicity of Cécile Volanges, a convent-bred seventeen-year-old whom he impregnates in order to punish her intended husband.

If there is a complaint to be levied against this crisp, witty, and consummately modish production of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, it is that Hampton and Davies have falsely softened the edges of a portrait of human deceit and depravity so uncompromising that it continues to scandalize the reader in an age which seemingly nothing can shock. Perhaps it has even shocked Laclos's current interpreters, so much so that they have turned his unblinking cynicism into an affecting sweetness, and have altogether balked at his suggestion that men and women will suffer the consequences of their misdeeds. At the end of Laclos's novel, Mme. de Merteuil flees the country, bankrupt, ravaged by smallpox, and exposed as a wicked schemer; at the end of Hampton's *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, Mme. de Merteuil

and her friends quietly play cards against a backdrop of drumrolls, warning us that the impending Revolution and Reign of Terror will settle all scores. Where Laclos's novel bares the vain and self-deluded motives lurking behind even the noblest sentiments, the RSC's production (in which Valmont is brought down by genuine love for the Presidente de Tourvel) tells us on the contrary that true feeling is something so irrepressible that it must triumph, however posthumously, over even the most satanic calculations.

Laclos's boudoir tale of sexual intrigue and Hugo's epic of battlefield and barricades, two works opposed to each other at every point, at least are agreed upon the gigantic moral and spiritual stakes involved in the exercise of the individual will in the service of good or evil. Here, indeed, in the depiction of the working out of that will, is where each would seem to hold out peculiar promise for theatrical adaptation. Yet the current Broadway versions of these two very different works are just as determinedly agreed on a rather different view: Where the will was, there shall "feelings" be; where good and evil were, there a society ripe for "change." It used to be that America, or "Broadway," could be accused of relentlessly homogenizing into some bland and popular pabulum every grand virtue and complex passion, but this particular job of work on two European masterpieces has been done by Europeans themselves and of the highest theatrical credentials. This time, at least, you can't blame Broadway first.

Literary free play at Rutgers

by James W. Tuttleton

What aims, claims, and conceptions justify the importance we ascribe to "English"? We need to be able to answer.

—F. R. Leavis

The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections is another demonstration—alongside *The Comic Sense of Henry James*, *A World Elsewhere*, and *The Performing Self*—of how sensitive a reader of local texts Richard Poirier can be.¹ Whoever takes the trouble to read this new book, which ruminates on a variety of current topics in criticism, will be struck with how ingeniously he can elicit from a Stevens poem or a passage in George Eliot the inarticulate struggle that underlies the creation of the form of the work as we have it. But in the present instance, Mr. Poirier, a professor at Rutgers, is after larger game. What holds his six rather miscellaneous essays together, in a doubtful unity, is a critique of the idea—enunciated recently by Secretary of Education William J. Bennett—that the humanities are in decline and that only some kind of critical renewal can restore literary studies to a vital role in the life of American culture. Mr. Poirier's view of the value of literature to society produces some surprises in this "Emersonian" meditation.

Let me say at the outset that Poirier is not an Emersonian in any obvious sense of that term. Much that compelled Emerson into

expression, including the deep spiritualism of his Transcendental faith, is of no interest to our author. Poirier's book merely reflects "a way of reading things which Emerson induces in us," rather than "any ideas or attitudes abstracted from a reading of him." This is as much as to say that Emerson's habitual interrogation of received ideas and values is what authorizes the subtitle of the book. Poirier's Emerson is the father of Nietzsche, or at least a brother in deconstructionist arms, and Nietzsche appears to have fathered this book. What ideas and values, then, are revalued in Poirier's reflection?

First and foremost he attacks the Arnoldian idea that literature embodies the humanist tradition, that it is a repository of moral and social values that are worthwhile for people to have as a constraint upon "doing as one likes." In particular, Poirier is manifestly contemptuous of the "politicians of high culture for whom taking literature seriously consists in finding how it might help us 'out of our present difficulties.'" In this he has in mind Secretary Bennett, who in *To Reclaim a Legacy* has called for educational reforms intended to provide students with "a common culture rooted in civilization's lasting vision, its highest shared ideals and aspirations, and its heritage." Poirier has no patience with what he calls "reclamation projects of this kind." He is quite sure that they are "the expression, usually, of some disguised cultural or social agenda

1 *The Renewal of Literature*, by Richard Poirier; Random House, 244 pages, \$19.95.

which none of the great writers summoned from the past could possibly endorse." He sees Bennett's argument as a smokescreen intended to hide the Reagan government's failures in alleviating poverty, racism, etc. No evidence of this supposed political diversion is offered. "Still more perplexing," Poirier remarks, is that Bennett's reclamation project "fails to take account of how literature is troubled within itself, how much, in fact, it shows the futility of this quest for truth, values, and exaltations."

It is no use saying to Poirier that many texts show anything but the futility of this quest. He has made up his mind that literature is an indivisible entity, that it cannot "arbitrate real or imagined cultural crises," and that it "is not in itself an effective political form of action At best," he thinks, "it can help us to deal more critically and effectively than we otherwise might with rhetorics outside literature."

For Emerson, Poirier rightly remarks, literature arises from "genius." But I am uncomfortable with his claim that Emerson saw genius as an amoral energy indifferent "to standards of good and evil." Emerson, as I read him, was sublimely confident that the genius animating true literature was profoundly benign, in a word, transcendently moral, though often misunderstood by superficial minds. Emerson had little respect for an ethic derived from the social mores of the local culture, but he was quite vigorous in defending Platonic "Higher Laws," to which the true artist's work gives expression. Poirier does not appear to accept Emerson's faith in transcendental values, in universals, and this refusal falsifies, I believe, much of what he derives from Emerson's thinking about the moral and social function of literature. In any case, Poirier has no patience with "the culturally conservative" who argue that literature

ought to preserve any particular image of nature, the human, or the past. Precisely the reverse. Literature exists to challenge the inherited forms of language. It exists in and through the act by which it questions what at

the same time it proposes; it challenges in one period—in one phrase—the images predominant in another, and it exposes as a figuration, a shadow, any term, like "human" or "natural," which the culture at large may want to idealize for its own political or historical convenience.

Such challenges are indeed issued by various writers. They do at times rebel against a prevailing image of the human or a particular social arrangement. But what the individual writer may desire, as expressed in his literary form, and what society may want to preserve are often quite different things. At times society may require a literature of stabilities, at other times not. Even the writer may have, as Poirier well knows, piety for the tradition, reverence for the fathers, a rage for order. Here Poirier tends to look at literature virtually from the artist's point of view—the alienated Romantic artist's view at that. And he finds Bennett's emphasis on conserving the literary tradition—for what it may teach us about what it means to be human, and how we ought to act—a misunderstanding of the nature of literature and its function. For Poirier, "We do not go to literature to become better citizens or even wiser persons, but to discover how to move, to act, to work in ways that are still and forever mysteriously creative." We, in fact, go to literature for a variety of reasons, including its capacity to transmit to us the wisdom of accrued experience. Poirier's is only one reason, and a narrow, private, aesthetic, and anti-intellectual one: "the effort of reading, like the effort of writing, is entirely its own reward. To ask for more, to seek security in meaning, is a cheat upon literature and upon life." Poirier's is thus an idiosyncratic literary ethic; I, for one, don't mind cheating on it. Where wisdom is concerned I'll take it wherever I can find it.

In addition to indicting Secretary Bennett, Poirier accuses "humanist literary critics" of claiming for literature a redemptive power. These critics, he observes, ignore literature's deviations in language and morals or else try to make these deviations "accord with hu-

manistic assumptions about the self, and with the self's presumed desire to exist and to be redeemed" In this he is on surer ground. Certain critics do perform too many intellectual acrobatics in trying to purify effective writing of its own sometimes doubtful character. The way Walt Whitman was transformed from an obscene poet into the "Good, Gray Poet" is an instance of this phenomenon. The appeal to literature to redeem us is a by-product of the loss of religion as a source of ultimate values. Arnold thought literature could take the place of religion. And so do some humanist critics, despite Eliot's having destroyed the logic of this argument, in his quarrel with the New Humanists in the 1920s, when he showed that secular thought cannot sufficiently ground a theory of values. Poirier wishes to dissociate literature from received standards of value: he wants a literature of continuous radical iconoclasm. Why, he asks poignantly throughout the book, "did Arnold and not Emerson become the dominant figure in literary-cultural criticism in America up to the present moment?" He complains of "an ingrained refusal on the part of the Anglo-American institutions of literary criticism" to acknowledge "the power of the Emersonian heritage in any form, much less the one I am trying to define here." Emerson's contemporaries, of course, were fully aware of his heterodoxies. Most people don't have an orthodoxy nowadays, so can't see what Emerson subverts. But others have an intuition that he means trouble, means radical instability as a continuous way of being in the world, and find Arnold's emphasis on a tradition of the best and highest in literature a necessary corrective. For others, like Eliot, as the poem "Cousin Nancy" makes plain, neither Matthew nor Waldo provides the key to a rightly conceived social and moral tradition. In any case, for Poirier, the choice is Emerson: his radical affirmation of genius, which should never be constrained by institutions, or even by the literary text that contains it, sets at naught the very idea of tradition and is what we need now.

Paradoxically, in elaborating this argument, Poirier manufactures his own tradition—a pragmatism, emphasizing truth as what happens to an idea, not "a stagnant property inherent in it"—that descends from Emerson and Thoreau through William James to Frost and Stevens. This tradition is acclaimed as the answer to literary modernism, which Poirier finds contemptible for its contrived linguistic difficulty. Eliot's observation in "The Metaphysical Poets" (1921)—that the complexity of modern civilization requires the poet to become "more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning"—is alleged to be "an attempt to perpetuate the power of literature as a privileged and exclusive form of discourse." This attempt occurred "just at the point when English literature had itself begun, in the novel and in the great popular poets of the nineteenth century, to cater to the ethos of the so-called common man or common reader"

There is something wonderfully egalitarian in Poirier's attitude toward the common man; it appeals to my faith in liberal democracy. But I must remark that he verges on the romance of the primitive in his celebration of characters like Faulkner's Dilsey, Wordsworth's leech-gatherer, and other literary personae for whom, being illiterate, the act of reading and writing meant nothing. He sees them as typical of "the most admired and commendable human figures in works of genius, especially since 1800 or so" because they "are either un-literary or positively suspicious of literature Indeed you might say that the reason they are exemplary is that they do not engage in the exploitative enterprise of reading and writing." One might say this, but the question is whether it would add to understanding to do so. Poirier may be quite right to ask whether anyone would "argue for long that those who read and write Literature, especially as a profession," are "in any way morally or ethically superior to those who cannot read or write at all." But I am not inclined to agree that "it seems

sometimes as if the reverse were true." Nor do I agree whatsoever with his dismissal of modernism as "a snob's game" ("that is pretty much what it is").

In the prose of the book, it is clear, Mr. Poirier abjures snobbery. He is all for a self-presentation that declares his sympathy for the demotic. The result is an embarrassing conflict of styles in the book—one declaring high intelligence, the other marking Poirier as just a regular guy, this last a style of populist slumming. He remarks that, in the 1920s, "American literature simply had not gotten itself together and could not possibly do justice to its Emersonian components." At that time "American literature was still up for grabs" and the anti-democratic modernists won out. "Modernist literature is tough going," but nowadays "the characteristics and location of literary modernism, even its claims to existence, are . . . pretty much up for grabs."

These vulgarisms of style in a well-known man of letters play to the groundlings. But they do not mean that Poirier wants a simpler literature intelligible to the masses. In fact, Poirier argues that people should be spared the "illusion" that literature is of any particular value to them. Literature in his view is disciplined language; it is self-generated in order merely to satisfy an author's inner compulsion to get the work done. It has no wisdom to give a society of readers. This point of view, coming from a director of the Library of America—which seeks to make our literature widely available to the masses at low cost—may seem a bit odd. But Poirier sets for himself the task of thinking in the Emersonian vein; and if Emerson admonishes that "criticism must be transcendental, that is, must consider literature ephemeral & easily entertain the supposition of its entire disappearance," Poirier will oblige by working up a deconstructive exercise, an argument wholly to dispense with it.

I shall not reproduce here his tedious argument of insidious intent. It is so clinically dissevered from Emerson's call for a direct, original, and transcendental relation to the

Spirit informing the genius of true books that its conclusions falsify the source. Let me note only Poirier's conclusion: literature is dispensable because it is "a form of technology disguised as an attack upon it"; it is also "a form of cultural and imaginative imperialism." He does not like what he calls "the brutal efficiencies of literary form"; and he is troubled that "English literature allows itself to be used for the projection of state power." Allows itself? We have here a master of the obscurantist reification.

"Thanks mostly to Foucault and his followers," Poirier observes, "the word 'power' has become tiresomely recurrent in discussions of cultural forms or the order of things." Even so, that he is himself a follower of Foucault is evident in his preoccupation with power throughout the book. In particular he is concerned with celebrating the power of genius which will know no constraint. Consequently, he defends unfettered experimental thinking and writing from the criticism of traditional humanists. This leads him to attack the reservations of

those middle- would-be high-brow elements of the literary-critical establishment (as featured in such politically and culturally conservative journals as *Commentary*, *The American Scholar*, and *The New Criterion*) whenever the canon is disrupted by the appearance of experimental or theoretical work. "Inessential," "evasive," "obscurantist"—this has at some point been said of nearly every innovative writer, specifically including some who have subsequently proved to be the most important critics, in recent history.

These experimental writers and critics are not specified, though the attention given here to Nietzsche, Harold Bloom, and Foucault may suggest an answer. And the doubters publishing in the above-named journals are likewise not named. So the matter remains a bit befogged.

For the sake of enlightenment on this matter, and supposing that he might mean (amongst others) *me*, and thinking of how I might elevate my own middle- would-be

highbrow condition, I turned to Mr. Poirier's quarterly journal, *Raritan*. This journal was founded in 1981 specifically to explore, as the Prospectus promised, "the workings of cultural power" that Mr. Poirier, still its editor-in-chief, now finds, *après* Foucault, so "tiresome." I have not been a frequent reader of this journal. But I intend to remedy the lack, as it promises to deliver essays that—I am meant to understand—have the requisite lucidity, centrality, and experimentalism typical of avant-garde criticism. One of the essays in the Fall 1986 issue, a piece by one Harry Frankfurt, is entitled "On Bullshit." Mr. Frankfurt has identified a major failing in our intellectual life: "... we have no theory of bullshit." The lack of such a theory he feels to be inhibiting to our understanding of personal and public affairs. In particular he is keen to identify people who substitute their own sincerity for being precise or correct. His essay, modestly tentative, proposes "to begin the development of a theoretical understanding of bullshit," which he regards as "one of the most salient features of our culture . . ."

I shall leave it up to the reader to explore Frankfurt's cogitations on this highbrow fecal theme, noting only that Frankfurt is identified, quite believably, as the chairman of the department of philosophy at Yale University. But another essay—by George Kateb, called "Thinking about Extinction: Nietzsche and Heidegger"—likewise brought me back to Poirier, for extinction is also a subject of *The Renewal of Literature* and appears to be a topic of much advanced thought nowadays. Poirier is taken with Nietzsche's longing for the "erasure" of man. In this repudiation of the idea of man, Poirier has found an ally in Foucault's *The Order of Things*, with its claims for the disappearance of those arrangements of knowledge that constitute the Western metaphysic of the self. For Foucault, the idea of the self is "an exhausted, discredited invention." The self, like the modern era, which according to Foucault "lasted until 1950," must now be written off.

In reading Nietzsche and Foucault, I have

always done them the justice of taking them seriously, even of thinking literally about their express longing for the disappearance of the self, of the Western metaphysic of presence, even of the extinction of mankind. I have always regarded their conception of human nature, their wish for a new man, as exalted in its utopian possibility, like Emerson's view of man as "a god in ruins"; and I have regarded them as antagonists to a tragic view of the self endorsed in the humanism of the Western literary tradition, in its most valuable incarnations.

Professor Poirier advises me that it is not necessary to take Nietzsche and Foucault at their word. He has mastered the methods of deconstructionism and suggests that even apparently overt philosophical propositions (not to speak of poems like Stevens's "The Snow Man" or Frost's "The Onset") are really only instances of figurative language enclosed in its own linguisticity. Reading about the extinction of the self is not for Poirier "an invitation to think about 'the Abyss' but to think about the way style—during the time one is attending to it—can make the possibility of self-eradication seem exhilarating or culturally beneficial." I confess to a lack of exhilaration, and find Poirier's denial of the nihilistic content of discourse in favor of its strategies of style to be simply perverse. Professor Poirier has no articulate ground for separating sense from style or style from its reference, or for denying the traditionally understood relationship between the act of reading and the transformation of consciousness, and the consequent expression of that altered consciousness in actions of purpose and power.

What troubles one finally about *The Renewal of Literature* is that the book announces a new dispensation, but its certainty is not earned: it is not the fruit of the requisite conceptual labor. Its perversities result—to adapt one of his remarks about Wallace Stevens—from "the relaxed indifference of the [moral] will." Nearly a century ago the great historian Jacob Burckhardt observed that "When men lose their sense of established standards, they inevitably fall

victim to the urge for pleasure or power." In Poirier's indifference to the social reference of literature, to its capacity to disclose a world instinct with meaning for standards in art as well as in personal and social morality, he has allied himself with those who see literature as merely a language game, a performing occasion for what Stevens called the "bawds of euphony" in their bravados of style, a pastime of exhilarations, and the camp playground of the aesthete. It's time to defend Arnold's notion of high seriousness.

Isn't it romantic

Muriel Spark Mary Shelley: A Biography.
E.P. Dutton, 272 pages, \$17.95

reviewed by Donna Rifkind

Few literary figures have been so intent as the Shelleys were on examining, with the impassioned precision specific to the very young, the differences between themselves and others. Few writers, furthermore, have so enthusiastically rearranged their circumstances so that they could translate those differences into the pages of their books and the texture of their lives. For those incurable Romantics, comparison was everything; they were obsessed by associations, by doubles, by the distance between souls and by the faith that art and love could reduce that distance. It is therefore unthinkable that Mary Shelley's identity could be understood outside the context of her relationships to the hard-driving personalities of her father, her husband, and other figures in the Shelley circle; without those comparisons, her story is hugely diminished. Curiously, after taking care to describe the details of Mary Shelley's relationships, Muriel Spark goes on in this newly revised biography to try to separate Mary's thought from the influences of those vivid personalities with which she surrounded herself. The result is an extremely uneven portrait.

Muriel Spark is known primarily for her novels, but she began her writing career

with an earlier version of the present biography entitled *Child of Light*, published in England in 1951. One wonders whether the figure of Mary Shelley interested Muriel Spark sufficiently to cause her to make the Romantic heroine's spirit a presence in her novels. But a reading of those novels—from *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* to *The Abbess of Crewe*—reveals consistently polished, high-style surfaces and a sharp, snappy underlayer of cynicism; there are no indications that Spark has been either influenced by Mary Shelley's own novels or moved to fictionalize any aspect of Mary's character.

Why, then, is Spark electing to republish this biography, her first effort? As the author explains in her new preface, she has produced this revised version for publication in the United States because the earlier work appeared here some years ago in a "pirated" edition, without her permission. She explains also that further scholarship on Mary Shelley during the last thirty-six years—most notably Betty T. Bennett's edition of her letters—has made Spark feel that yet another reassessment is necessary. Her 1951 biography is generally considered to be a standard scholarly text, along with Elizabeth Nitchie's *Mary Shelley: Author of Frankenstein* (1953), Frederick L. Jones's edition of *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley* (1946), and R. Glynn Grylls's *Mary Shelley* (1935).

The story of the Shelley circle—the jaunts through Italy, the clashes with Lord Byron, the visions and ghost stories—is so well known that, as with the Bloomsbury set, both the facts and fabrications exist companionably together as accepted truth. What we know about Mary Shelley's life may be conveniently divided into two halves: first, her girlhood, which culminated in meeting Percy Bysshe Shelley when she was fifteen, eloping with him at seventeen, and living with him on the Continent and in London for eight years before his death by drowning in 1822; and second, the rest of her life, which she spent raising her one surviving son, attempting to earn money and respectability through her writings, editing Shelley's poems, and redesigning, with the

utmost care and for the benefit of posterity, the details of her life with Shelley into a harmonious, perfect memory.

The contrasting facets of Mary's personality may be categorized with equal convenience within these two halves of her life. The headstrong daughter of radical parents—William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft—she was until Shelley's death an independent, energetic spirit, eager to rebel against convention and the wishes of her father by running off with a twenty-one-year-old married poet and following him around France and Italy loaded down with books, various friends and children, and her awestruck stepsister Claire. After Shelley's death, Mary changed swiftly into a much sobered woman with a total lack of desire to shock or defy. This sudden switch is perhaps best illustrated in a story told by Matthew Arnold: Mary, seeking advice about which school to send her son Percy to after Shelley's death, was advised to "send him somewhere they will teach him to think for himself." She objected immediately and fiercely: "Teach him to think for himself? Oh, my God, teach him rather to think like other people." This is a touching emotional display coming from the once-wild daughter of two famous social and political reformers and the widow of an eccentric. Clearly, thinking for oneself was no longer the sweet ideal she had once held it to be; burdened with large debts and the isolation of instant widowhood, with little money coming from her husband's estate, it was far more important to her now to concern herself with her urgent new responsibilities, which required her to make an effort for the first time to fit in and settle down. The party, to put it succinctly, was over.

Preferring not to dwell on the abrupt transition in Mary's life from romantic runaway to solemn matron, Muriel Spark believes the assumption that Mary craved more and more "bourgeois respectability" after Shelley's death is an "over-simplification," and emphasizes instead how the disparate qualities in Mary's personality were reconciled as

she grew older. Spark is extremely interested in the concept of "integration," which she returns to repeatedly throughout the book: one reads about how Mary's mother's "distrust and fear of men" purportedly "tends to support the view that [her] character never achieved integration." "Mary should be properly credited," Spark writes at another point, "with the integrating influence she exerted over Shelley, to which he himself admitted."

In the end, to be sure, Spark concedes that "All people contain within them the elements of conflict . . . [Mary] was one in whom contrast, and therefore conflict, was perpetuated, and in this respect she is not unique within the artistic species." Nor indeed, one might add, is she unique within the human species, but until one reaches this passage in the book one feels that Spark is insisting not only that such "integration" is possible, but that it is expected of people with such superior sensibilities as Mary Shelley possessed. While it is true that the quest for the integrity of one's soul—for the reconciliation of warring elements within a single personality—was a noble pursuit for the Romantics, it seems anachronistic that Spark should want to carry this preoccupation into our own time. Just because Mary herself was fascinated by the idea of integrity (it is indeed the theme of *Frankenstein*, her first novel: the story of a tragically divided identity, a man whose emotions cannot be brought into harmony with his intellect) does not mean that her biographer must interpret her personality along its lines; in observing this lack of critical objectivity one has the sense, which grows stronger as the book progresses, that Muriel Spark is perhaps a bit too close to her subject.

Whether or not Mary Shelley's personality ever did reach a degree of "integration" is less interesting than the extent to which both she and her husband managed to redesign their circumstances to please themselves. On this aspect of their lives Spark is perceptive and eloquent, as when she describes how Shelley blithely devised a set of "logical" reasons for separating from his first wife, Har-

riety. Spark shows that what Shelley believed were rational explanations were in fact moonstruck effusions which satisfied no one but himself. Writing to his friend Thomas Jefferson Hogg in 1814, he explained, "I saw the full extent of the calamity which my rash and heartless union with Harriet . . . had produced. I felt as if a dead and living body had been linked together in loathsome and horrible communion . . . I had even proceeded so far as to compose a letter to Harriet on the subject of my passion for another." At the time Shelley wrote this, however, he had not yet fallen in love with Mary; there was no "passion for another." Spark observes, "Here was a type of poetic mind working at a fundamental tempo of amorality and timelessness. Already Shelley not only rejected his married life with Harriet, but accepted a new relationship . . . Shelley was in this emotionally receptive state when he discovered that Mary matched the woman of his day-dream."

After their elopement, Shelley and Mary continued this constant adjustment of reality as they travelled through France, Switzerland, and Italy. In the journal which they wrote together during this time one notes how delightedly self-conscious they were of the high-pitched romance of their adventure; at one point, in the enthusiastic, adolescent sunburst of an extremely bad idea, Shelley actually invited Harriet to join them. (Harriet had the good sense to refuse.) Even after Harriet drowned herself in 1816, Shelley was remarkably able to disregard the reasons for her death so that he could absolve himself of blame. "His pliable spirit," Spark writes, "embraced no feelings of remorse which might have suggested themselves to a mind more firmly established on earth, however innocent." Later, Spark shows how the couple managed to maintain an atmosphere of robust, undiminished energy even when their baby daughter had died, both were ill, and the inconveniences of constant travel were beginning to overpower them: "This breathless pursuit of activity seems to have been a symptomatic safety-valve measure against despair."

Despair was a constant companion to the Shelleys—both abstract dejection over life's transience and cold depression about immediate misfortunes, like the death of their daughter. These feelings were no doubt what lay behind their constant search for ways to rearrange unpleasant circumstances. Although Spark here has a great deal of sympathy for Mary (she lost three children during this extended European journey, and Spark sensitively conveys her grief), the biographer does tend at times to make statements that seem vaguely like homilies and which add nothing to our understanding of Mary's pessimism except a note of triteness. Spark writes of Mary, "It often seems that such people invite the Furies by their own apprehension, that misfortune gains confidence, as a fierce animal will at the sense of a stranger's fear."

Nor does Spark often manage to muster up sympathy for any characters besides Shelley and Mary, a failure which contributes to the book's unevenness and again gives one the impression that Spark is too close to her subject. Of Claire, Mary's pathetic stepsister, who accompanied the couple on their elopement out of admiration for Mary and a half-developed infatuation with Shelley, Spark has only this to say: "There can be no more insidious or inconvenient company for the truly creative mind as this parasitic type of *manqué* individual."

In any case, Mary's most creative act of adjusting reality as a means of warding off despair was her sentimental reconstruction of her life with Shelley after the poet had died. It was a task which she spent the rest of her life working at, and in a way it can be considered her most imaginative piece of fiction-spinning. To read Mary's writing about Shelley is to examine one of the great hagiographical enterprises ever undertaken by a woman; no man, we are urged to believe, was more perfect, more ingenious, more loving. Spark writes that, after Shelley's death, "Mary lived half her life in retrospect, the other half in preparing herself to face an uncertain future." Both activities required an immense amount of courage, not least

because both steadily reminded her of her new loneliness. Matters did not improve when Shelley's father, Sir Timothy Shelley, threatened to cut off her small allowance if a biography of Shelley or a collection of his poems was published during Sir Timothy's lifetime. It was at this time that Mary wrote her novel *The Last Man*, a futuristic fantasy about loss and isolation during a plague which destroys the entire human race.

Mary never married again, although it seems she was not without offers. Spark writes that Mary felt "the respect of all who knew her depended upon their recognition of her proud place in Shelley's life and work, and her courageous combat with countless tribulations since his death . . ." She developed a "self-protective hardness which preserved her sanity but which as she grew older her friends interpreted as self-centredness and frigidity." She died in 1851 at age fifty-three, leaving behind six novels, some travel literature, and the edited collections of Shelley's poetry, which are considered to be indispensable to all the Shelley scholarship which was to follow. She was survived by her son Percy, a perfectly dull, comforting fellow who displayed none of the spirited eccentricity or any of the independence of intellect of his father, mother, or maternal grandparents.

Before going on to discuss Mary Shelley's own works, Spark concludes the biographical section of her book with a restatement of her central thesis that Mary, besides being the wife and daughter of famous literary figures, "was also a professional writer of lasting fame." Of what does this "lasting fame" consist? If one knows anything at all about Mary Shelley, it is doubtless her role as the seventeen-year-old author of *Frankenstein*, a work of precocious brilliance. This book's unfortunate fate is of course that the complexities of its central characters, Victor Frankenstein and his monster, have been overpowered in the public's imagination by the monster's caricature. The name of Frankenstein is less likely to evoke Mary Shelley's "Promethean man," who abhors the crea-

ture he has created, than it brings to mind the bolts-in-the-neck cartoon creature of Saturday morning television. Spark has long been considered one of the most perceptive critics of this book, showing how influences such as the Gothic tradition, William Godwin's novel *Caleb Williams*, Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" contributed to the complexity of this immature, baldly terrifying, exuberantly improbable ghost story.

Spark's championing of Mary's other novels is not nearly as persuasive. *The Last Man* is interesting for its reflection of Mary's depression while she wrote it, but as a work of fiction it is not, despite Spark's protests, a very readable book; it is humorless, melodramatic, and heavy. What Spark prefers to see as its "mesmeric evenness" is in truth merely dull overwriting. Upon its publication in 1826, the *London Magazine and Review* called *The Last Man* "an elaborate piece of gloomy folly—bad enough to read—horrible to write," and in this case one can only agree. The historical romance *Perkin Warbeck*, an attempt to emulate Sir Walter Scott, is not even available in a modern edition, but when Spark argues that "as an entity, *Perkin Warbeck* is of less value than are its component parts, which merit attention since they confirm certain stable elements in Mary's writings," her faint praise seems only to emphasize the novel's failures. Of Mary's poems, one of which, "A Dirge," Spark reprints in the book, the less said the better; Spark speaks of a "deeply latent" poetic talent in Mary, but if some latent tendencies are best left undiscovered this is surely one of them. Mary herself confessed in a letter that "I can never write verses, except under the influence of a strong sentiment & seldom even then."

Spark ends her biography with the following pronouncement: "To a great extent Mary Shelley inherited an environment fifty years or more behind her time, and occupied one fifty years ahead of her." This seems totally unconvincing, for Spark's biography has shown that what was fortunate

and what was cruel in Mary Shelley's life—her lucky parentage and her alliance with Shelley, her forced solitude and her painful desire for respectability—all of these factors firmly determined her particular course. The life she might have had fifty years after her time is not only an irrelevant but also a futile consideration for, as Spark herself says, "Mary Shelley breathed the air of her times, as we breathe ours." Without her very specific context she would of course have been a different woman, a different writer; the society she rebelled against as a girl and the status she sought as a widow were significant in the development of her character, just as the intellectual ammunition she received from Godwin and Shelley became indispensable to her own writing.

Spark quotes a passage from Mary's journal to show the seeds of a philosophy that she feels distinguishes Mary's thought from that of Godwin and Shelley, a philosophy Spark calls a "practical manifesto of love":

... & as Sterne says, that in solitude he would worship a tree, so in the world I should attach myself to those who bore the semblance of those qualities which I admire Let me love & admire [my fellow creatures] at their just rate, neither adding or diminishing, & above all, let me fearlessly descend into the remotest caverns of my own mind, carry the torch of self-knowledge into its dimmest recesses

These are indeed the words of a bold-minded woman, but they constitute no convincing philosophy, and rather than pointing to the separateness of Mary's vision, they emphasize her preoccupation with the connections it is possible and desirable to make between distinct personalities ("I should *attach* myself . . ."). Mary herself realized that context, comparison, and connection are the important, the essentially human, characteristics worth dwelling on—characteristics that Spark has provided in this biography, but which she has tried to counterbalance with examples of "separateness" in efforts to lift this writer beyond her milieu

into a falsely aggrandized pantheon where writers who happen to be women, only because they are women, have in recent years been forcibly entombed.

Spark is fortunate to have as her subject a woman whose life was interesting and whose talent was far from inconsequential; these happy facts have saved her from many dangers that threaten biographers bent on superficially congratulating less interesting, less gifted woman writers. One feels that Spark's unsuccessful attempt to extract Mary from her environment comes not so much from a desire to exalt the author beyond her due as from a simple lack of critical distance, a fault which has not been corrected in this revision of a book written over thirty years ago. Spark in her preface admits that, upon re-reading her earlier work, she "was amused to perceive that my prose style had taken on a touch of Mary Shelley's." Muriel Spark's is an interesting biographical problem: in coming so close to her subject that she begins to take on aspects of Mary Shelley, she loses sight of the person whose essence she so carefully pursues.

Warming up for poetry

Robert Lowell Collected Prose.
Farrar, Straus & Giroux,
371 pages, \$25

reviewed by James Atlas

"Were we uncomfortable epigoni of Frost, Pound, Eliot, Marianne Moore, etc?" Robert Lowell muses in his memoir of John Berryman. Reading Lowell's *Collected Prose*, I marveled at the way each generation feels overshadowed by the generation that preceded it. A decade after his death, Lowell seems even larger now than he did when he was a living presence on the scene, our greatest poet. His work resonates with undiminished force; it appears out of another world. I was struck by how old-fashioned, how rare and archaic his erudition must sound to a contemporary reader. Page after page of

effortless discourse on such matters as the merits of various English translations of Ovid from the Renaissance to our own day; the problems of translating *Phèdre*; the character of the “woman-shy man” in French literature, in Racine, Constant, Stendhal: there’s no impulse to show off in these references, none of the amateur scholar’s need to establish credentials. A classical education acquired at St. Mark’s School, in his year at Harvard, and at Kenyon, where John Crowe Ransom encouraged him to study Latin and Greek, was Lowell’s training for poetry. “It is hard for me [now] to imagine a poet not interested in the classics,” he wrote in his memoir of Ransom. For Lowell, the study of languages was a primary aspect of the poet’s vocation; it served to place him, to put his own work in a literary context, a tradition.

Do I idealize the recent literary past? I don’t think so. Lowell and his friends—by no coincidence the greatest American poets of his generation—lived for literature. Few contemporary poets, I suspect, could match their fanatical absorption in their craft. Lowell’s memoirs of Jarrell and Berryman evoke an atmosphere utterly dominated by poetry. Berryman quoted Shakespeare “to show me what could be done with disrupted and mended syntax.” Jarrell spent a whole summer studying the *Sonnets*. Literature was their environment, the air they breathed. One night toward the end of his life Lowell came to dinner at my house in Cambridge and put the guests to sleep as he mumbled for five hours behind a wall of wine bottles about whether Pound’s *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* was better than the *Cantos*. It was inconceivable to him that people could exist who had no opinion on the subject.

For the poets of Lowell’s generation, this literary intensity was a natural inheritance. The New Critics “were very much news,” he recalled in his *Paris Review* interview with Frederick Seidel (also reprinted here). “You waited for their essays, and when a good critical essay came out it had the excitement of a new imaginative work.” What’s striking is how different the disciples’ criticism was from their mentors’. Didacticism simply

wasn’t their style. Berryman, intense, ardent, energetic, was surprisingly plainspoken—unlike, say, R. P. Blackmur, his teacher at Princeton, whose knotted rhetoric seemed defiantly obscure. Berryman’s essays in *The Freedom of the Poet* on Fitzgerald and Dreiser, Conrad and James, are a bright student’s A paper, proof that he’d read the books, and read them carefully. Jarrell, the most famous of the poet-critics, was shrill, argumentative, determined to make a point, but no one could accuse him of obscurantism. His clarity was deafening.

Criticism was a collaborative effort. Berryman and Jarrell published significant reviews (“definitive,” Lowell wryly calls them both) of *Lord Weary’s Castle*; and Lowell’s remarks on their work, tossed off and provisional as they are, seem to me equally definitive. Jarrell, he wrote in a famous eulogy, was “monstrously knowing and monstrously innocent . . . a Wordsworth with the obsessions of Lewis Carroll.” This is witty, subversive, true; it captures both Jarrell’s character and his work. A review of Berryman’s *Dream Songs* is, in its own courtly way, just as devastating: “At first the brain aches and freezes at so much darkness, disorder, and oddness,” Lowell objects. “The poems are much too difficult, packed, and wrenched to be sung.” It was a balanced review, with generous and heartfelt approbation, but you feel (to use a Lowellian locution) that his praise is reluctant: “. . . yet I soon surrendered . . .”; “and yet one must give in.” Inside the positive review a negative review is struggling to get out.

Lowell’s memoirs of his dead friends are movingly sympathetic, warm, even loving; yet his impressions of their characters possess the same asperity, the same wry, nearly unspoken disapproval that glimmers through his evaluations of their work. “From the first, John was humorous, learned, thrustingly vehement in liking,” he writes of Berryman, “more adolescent than boyish.” That *thrustingly* says it all. Berryman’s heroism, his effort to wrestle with the doom that shadowed his life—his alcoholism, his megalomania, his father’s suicide—is sketched in

with somber dignity. Berryman stumbling down the corridor to his class, his hand on the wall, teaching, and then walking out to the waiting ambulance; Berryman phoning up his friends in the middle of the night; Berryman in a New York bar, pale and shaky, the year before his death: the pathos is there, and the impatience. Lowell's honesty liberates him to say the truth about Berryman's work without violating that questionable axiom, *de mortuis nil nisi bonum*, of the dead speak nothing but good: to say, for instance, that the loud, sprawling, self-congratulatory poems in *Love & Fame* were "profane and often in bad taste, the license of John's old college dates recollected at fifty." A hard judgment, perhaps, but written without malice.

The eulogist, of course, has the great advantage—the advantage of the last word. "I used to want to live/to avoid your elegy," Lowell confessed in the beautiful poem to Berryman in *Day by Day*. His reminiscence of Jarrell at Kenyon is just as affectionate, just as mordant: "His body was a little ghostly in its immunity to soil, entanglements, and rebellion. As one sat with him in oblivious absorption at the campus bar, sucking a fifteen-cent chocolate milk shake and talking eternal things, one felt, beside him, too corrupt and companionable." Yes, Jarrell was innocent—perhaps willfully so, but innocent nonetheless. Lowell, mad in his own way, was more sane than either of them; or anyway, more mature. His calm was magisterial, olympian. In his account of the time he brought Jarrell to visit Berryman in Princeton, Lowell claims that he had to mediate between them; they quarreled over everything, were petulant, spoiled the evening. I believe him. Impetuous, bullying, even dangerous in his manic phases, he was never infantile; he possessed an austerity, a New England reserve, that resonates in these memoirs. Was it only an accident that of the poets who make up the so-called Tragic Generation—Berryman, Delmore Schwartz, Jarrell—Lowell came closest to dying a natural death? (He died at sixty, of a heart attack in a New York taxicab.) Survey-

ing the wreckage of his generation in his role as the survivor, Lowell played down the untimely deaths of his contemporaries. "John himself lived to the age of Beethoven," he argued, and died "with fewer infirmities than Beethoven." The others lived as long as Shakespeare, longer than Wyatt, Baudelaire, and Hopkins, a good deal longer than the Romantics. His proof concluded, Lowell gracefully disavows it. "The consolation somehow doesn't wash."

Lowell's *Collected Prose* is less ample than Berryman's *The Freedom of the Poet* and Jarrell's four volumes of criticism; it's slight, occasional, haphazard. It has a padded, patched-together feel. Do we really need the letter Lowell wrote telling off President Roosevelt when he became a conscientious objector during World War II? It's all in "Memories of West Street and Lepke." Or the letter to Lyndon Johnson telling *him* off? The two long interviews, with Frederick Seidel and Ian Hamilton, are redundant. Yet everything here recalls Lowell's unmistakable voice; even in a fugitive piece, his introduction to a reading by Andrei Voznesensky, you get a characteristic glimpse of the poet himself: "The other night, I found myself shaving," he tells the audience. "An impatient, just-lit cigarette was sighting me down from the soap dish, and the bathroom door was ajar to catch messages from the world news roundup." I can only guess what his audience made of this bizarre digression, but I could hear in it Lowell's distracted, anecdotal voice, outwardly oblivious but instinctively shrewd, self-absorbed but never solipsistic.

A feminist critic once complained in a review that Lowell's introduction to Sylvia Plath's *Ariel* was really about Lowell. It was clear that he had only the vaguest recollection of Plath, an intermittent auditor of his seminar at Boston University in the late Fifties, this critic argued; so he dwelled instead on what he saw out the window: "the city outskirts' defeated yellow brick and square concrete pillbox filling stations." But he *did* notice Plath: "She was willowy, long-waisted,

sharp-elbowed, nervous, giggly, gracious—a brilliant tense presence embarrassed by restraint.” Lowell is a master of the terse, improvised portrait: Ford Madox Ford was “large, unwieldy, wheezy, unwell, and looked somehow like a British version of the Republican elephant.” Robert Frost “could talk you dead—and not with monologue, but by carrying on through the night.” Or this sketch of Ransom and Tate, vying to be gentlemen: “There were moments in Ransom’s ironic courtesies that reduced even Allen Tate to white-faced finger-twitching, so far had the conversation seemed to fall from reckless sublimity.”

Lowell recorded his contemporaries with a merciless eye, but he could be just as merciless about the dead. Spenser’s *Shepherd’s Calendar* “is mostly a sort of dried cake frosting.” Dryden’s couplets in his translation of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* “roar like an unmuffled Vespa . . .” He made no distinction between the living and the dead. They mingled in his imagination, a single constituency: men of letters. As Helen Vendler noted in *The New Republic*, poets and novelists read in a profoundly different way from the professional critic; “their fellow writers, dead or alive, are the realest people they know.” When they write criticism, it’s with a kind of “insolence” or “presumptuousness.” They’re writing from inside the process. Lowell’s intimacy with his dead precursors is uncanny. His grasp of Thoreau—not Thoreau the writer, but Thoreau the man—is intuitive, a quick analytic study. “Thoreau can be relentlessly perverse,” he complains. “His insistence on the pettiness of man and the largeness of nature, on the triviality of the world and the infinite capacities of Walden, is mannered. His boast that he had seen the whole world in his rambles through Concord seems a morose witticism.” Or this comment on Henry James, identifying two components of his character: “one is Proust’s tender, idealized narrator yearning for truth, kindness, eternity; the other is Baron Charlus, a whale in society, overhearing behind the scenes and conspiring.” For Lowell, motive and personality are the keys to criti-

cism; literature is not inert, a text, but the work of once-living—in his mind, still-living—men.

“I’m very anxious in criticism not to do the standard analytical essay,” he said in his interview with Seidel. “I’d like my essay to be much sloppier and more intuitive.” *Sloppier* is too stringent a word; Lowell had learned from the New Critics, and he knew how to write an orderly critical essay. He was a superb close reader (as efficient literary critics are called these days). His early reviews of Ransom, Eliot, Stevens, and others published in the serious little magazines that were so influential in the 1940s have a measured gravity about them, an aura of studious intent. They were stilted, as early writing usually is, self-conscious in both judgment and style; and he could be punitive, blurting out his opinions with a school-boy tactlessness. Reviewing Elizabeth Bishop’s *North & South* in 1947, he found much to admire; but some of the poems were “trivial,” “pert,” “banal,” he reported. “About ten of its thirty poems are failures. Another ten are either unsatisfactory as wholes, or very slight.” More often he was cautious, scholarly, bland—the young critic on his best behavior in the pages of an austere journal destined to circulate among teaching fellows in the best English departments. It wasn’t until the Fifties and Sixties that he found his characteristic style: offhanded, weirdly idiomatic, the compound verbs piling up. In his great essay, “New England and Further,” a chatty, idiosyncratic portrait of American writers from Cotton Mather to Eliot that he wrote from memory, without a library near to hand, Lowell invokes the death of the old landscape he knew, displaced by “the greedy, sun-grasping glass of the small view-thirsting modern bungalows.” It’s the style of his poems, written in prose.

Sometimes it *is* the poems. Here is Lowell recalling a visit to Frost in Cambridge one night, Frost confessing that “when he was excited and full of himself, he came back by thinking how little good his health could do those who were close to him.” The essay is dated 1963. Six years later, in *Notebook*, we

find the same observation in a sonnet entitled "Robert Frost":

And he, "When I am too full of joy, I think
how little good my health did anyone near me."

Writing of Eliot in 1965, Lowell recounts an anecdote about trying to cross a busy Cambridge street in the poet's company:

Behind us, Harvard's Memorial Hall with its wasteful, irreplaceable Victorian architecture and scrolls of the Civil War dead. Before us, the rush-hour traffic. As we got stuck on the sidewalk, looking for an opening, Eliot out of the blue sky said, "Don't you loathe being compared with your relatives?" Pause, as I put the question to myself, groping for what I really felt, for what I should decently feel. Eliot: "I do." Pause again, then the changed lifting voice of delight. "I was reading Poe's reviews the other day. He took up two of my family and wiped the floor with them." Pause. "I was delighted."

Here is the same anecdote in *Notebook*:

Caught between two streams of traffic, in
the gloom
of Memorial Hall and Harvard's war-dead . . .
And he:
'Don't you loathe to be compared with your
relatives?
I do. I've just found two of mine reviewed
by Poe.
He wiped the floor with them . . . and I was
delighted.'

It's not plagiarism if you steal from yourself.

Prose as a warming up for poetry: virtually the whole of "Near the Unbalanced Aquarium," a fragment of prose memoir from 1957 published here for the first time, is a prefigurement of *Life Studies*. Lowell often talked about his difficulties arriving at the colloquial, open style of those poems, so familiar now, so revolutionary then. Responding to a symposium on "Skunk Hour" (also included in this volume), he described the fallow period in the late Fifties when he couldn't write, and how he finally broke

through to a new voice. In the memoir, written the same year as "Skunk Hour," he has already gotten down virtually the whole of *Life Studies*—in prose. "On the Sunday morning when we sailed, the whole shoreline of the Golfo di Genova was breaking into fiery flower," he writes, describing his mother's death in Italy and the ordeal of retrieving her body. In "Sailing Home from Rapallo," the identical scene appears virtually word for word, only in lines of verse.

To study the variants—the phrase dropped here, the image sharpened there—is a fascinating exercise. Nearly every poem in the fourth, autobiographical sequence of *Life Studies* is embedded, intact, in "Near the Unbalanced Aquarium." A reference to his mother's "bridal tinfoil" becomes "The corpse/was wrapped like *panetone* in Italian tinfoil." Recalling the aftermath of his father's death and his mother's dreary widowhood, he writes: "Fearfully, she had looked out of her windows at Beverly Farms, as though she were looking from the windows of a train that was drawing into one station beyond her destination." In *Life Studies*, this becomes:

Ready, afraid
of living alone till eighty,
Mother mooned in a window,
as if she had stayed on a train
one stop past her destination.

What's left out is just as revealing as what's left in. Why did Lowell omit the observation that his dying uncle's glasses "were like Harold Lloyd's glasses" when he recast several paragraphs of his memoir as "My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereaux Winslow," a poem that otherwise survived intact? It was irrelevant, and spoiled the tone. Poetry is selection.

"Near the Unbalanced Aquarium" doesn't have the feel of a discarded fragment rescued from a dead author's drawer; it stands as a nearly finished work, a companion piece to "91 Revere," the prose sequence in *Life Studies*. Lowell's eye is tirelessly exact;

he sees with a relentless clarity, chronicling every object in his father's study at Beverly Farms: "the brown oak-and-iron escritoire brought back from Palermo by Grandfather Winslow; the brown rug, lampshades, and curtains; the helmsman's-wheel frame of the ship's clock, a hollow brass rod that was a combination poker and bellows." His account of the nervous breakdown he suffered after his mother's death when, "tireless, madly sanguine, menaced, and menacing," he ended up in the Payne Whitney clinic at New York Hospital, is a truly harrowing description of insanity. He assaulted fellow inmates, dropped his glasses out the window, babbled crazily in the shower: "I blended the lonely tenor of some fourteenth-century Flemish monk to bars of 'Yankee Doodle,' and the *mmm-mmm* of the padlocked Papageno." Finally he was transferred to a maximum-security ward, denied belts, pajama cords, shoe strings: "For holding up my trousers, I invented an efficient, stringless method which I considered picturesque and called Malayan." Lowell's anecdotes about his madness are vivid, hallucinatory, real; they exert a lurid clinical fascination. But it was as poetry that they came into their own.

For Lowell, insanity was a manifestation of evil—the obverse of his imaginative genius. He identified with the great scoundrels in literature, and was convinced their authors did. Satan was the most animated character in *Paradise Lost*, he argued. Dante was fascinated by the sinners in the *Commedia*, and apathetic toward the saints: "They are written with a dry pen, and parsimonious vision." In a strange, somewhat hectic lecture entitled "Art and Evil," Lowell quotes Eliot's contention, in *After Strange Gods*, that evil "may operate through men of genius and excellent character," and offers a systematic analysis of villains in literature—Goethe's Mephistopheles, Sarah Gamp in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, George Eliot's Grandcourt in *Daniel Deronda*. The longest essay in the book, it's a *tour de force* of critical argument; the tone is utterly conversational, the erudition easily worn. What makes this essay so

moving is Lowell's sympathy with these villains; they exist for him less as characters than as frail human types brought down by their own malevolence. Lowell saw nothing romantic in his messy life. The divorces, the drinking, the affairs weren't licensed by his talent; they were afflictions. "Only out of pain is the art that can hide art," he wrote in his essay on Ransom; a throwaway aphorism that sums up Lowell's own life.

Tinsel talk

Larry McMurtry *Film Flam: Essays on Hollywood*. Simon and Schuster, 159 pages, \$16.95

reviewed by Bruce Bawer

Larry McMurtry, who is known primarily as the author of a number of elegiac, Texas-sized novels about his native Lone Star state, has also had something of a second career as a writer of movies, and (briefly) a third career as a writer of articles and columns based on his experiences as a writer of movies. His unpleasantly titled new collection, *Film Flam*—what a tongue twister!—consists of twenty-one opinionated pieces, most of them originally published in the magazine *American Film*, that render a writer's-eye view of what folks in Los Angeles like to refer to as "the industry" (a locution which, for me, always brings to mind images of Jane Fonda and Robert Redford sweating it out on an assembly line).

Among the subjects that McMurtry treats in these essays are the problems of adapting one's own novel for the movies, the advantages of writing screenplays away from Los Angeles, the fun of screenwriting, the L.A. ambience, and the unreadability of most film scripts. McMurtry describes an afternoon he spent with Diane Keaton and her nonagenarian grandmother in Pasadena, compares and contrasts *Seven Beauties* and *All the President's Men* (he feels that the former has "radiance of spirit" and "greatness of heart," and the latter doesn't), and reviews two

books on the relation between novels and their film adaptations. He writes endlessly about his novel *The Last Picture Show* and the movie that Peter Bogdanovich made from it. (He seems to think that we are all extremely familiar with this movie, and that our appetites for details about its genesis are insatiable. By the end of the book one is sick to death of reading its very title.) Some of his essays are forthrightly reactionary: he complains about the unfilmability (as well as the unreadability) of such postwar novels as *Gravity's Rainbow* and *The Sot-Weed Factor*, and (in two separate essays) laments the "disappearance of love" and the "disappearance of grace" from the cinema. He also discusses the lack of beauty and feeling in pornographic movies and laments the departure of movie theaters, particularly drive-ins, from the rural middle-American landscape. And he offers critiques of two movies that were made from his own novels: Peter Bogdanovich's adaptation of *The Last Picture Show* gets very high marks, while Sidney Lumet's *Lovin' Molly*, derived from McMurtry's *Leaving Cheyenne*, gets very low marks.

Film Flam is itself something of a flim-flam. At times one finds oneself thinking that McMurtry's most impressive talent is his ability to ramble on at such length about so many inconsequential and overly familiar topics. Every so often, moreover, one has the feeling that one is reading a sentence, a passage, that one has already read in a previous essay—if not one of McMurtry's, then perhaps one of Gore Vidal's. Nonetheless, the book is consistently readable and diverting, and often, even when he is saying something one has heard before, one finds oneself admiring the way he says it. In a piece called "The Deadline Syndrome," for instance, he writes that *The Last Picture Show*

was exactly the kind of novel from which good movies are made—that is, a flatly written book with strong characterizations and a sense of period and place. Films like *The Blue Angel*, *Jules and Jim*, and *Treasure of Sierra Madre* were made from just such books—books that offer a director no stylistic resistance whatever. Tow-

ering classics always have a style, and adapting them is like attempting to translate poetry, only more difficult. Poetry is at least being taken from language to language, whereas a film adaptation attempts to take something from language to image. The director, like the translator, may take a free approach, or he may try to be literal, but if he hopes to find a cinematic counterpart to a literary style he can only count on being frustrated. True equivalents simply don't exist, and the book that best lends itself to filming, in my view, is the book from which one can abstract a place, a period, and a story for which the director can feel free to develop a style of his own.

Such passages notwithstanding, McMurtry, as the book's title suggests, finds the film business mostly absurd and its productions mostly meretricious, a verdict with which one can hardly disagree. He has particularly harsh things to say about the place of the writer in the business. For instance, in "No Clue: Or Learning to Write for the Movies," the book's lead piece, he argues that "[o]f the many crafts necessary to the making of motion pictures, that of the screenwriter is easily the most haphazard, the most impressionistic, and the most vulnerable. Screenwriting, so far, has no rationale, no theory, and, at best, an indifferent, pedestrian craft-literature." He complains that "[t]he vast bulk of the industry's writing chores is still divided between smart-assed amateurs (the novelists) and dull-witted hacks: in other words, between people who are given little chance to treat screenwriting as other than a joke, and the peons of the system, who can only treat it as a job." For his own part, McMurtry does not hesitate to treat the business as a joke: he concludes the essay by remarking that, "Fitzgerald, West, et al., not to the contrary—light comedy is the proper mode in which to consider the writer's role in Hollywood."

McMurtry, in short, doesn't take Hollywood very seriously (or, at least, doesn't want to *seem* to). Disconcertingly, however, he doesn't take his pieces—or the essay form

in general—very seriously either. In his foreword, he describes his novels as “the marriages and great loves” of his imagination, and the columns and articles contained in *Film Flam* as “quick tricks and one-night stands, the offspring of opportunity rather than passion.” He confesses that

[r]eading the pieces in galley was a surprise, not because they were better than I had hoped or worse than I feared, but simply because I had forgotten most of them completely. The emotion one invests in a novel weights any rereading with memory—the memory, at least, of what one felt for, and hoped for, its characters. But these essays evoke no characters and involved no long or loving invention. They moved quickly from head to typewriter and from typewriter to mailbox, to return in their present form as from a blank in my past.

Reading this passage, one is simultaneously impressed by McMurtry’s honesty and struck by his nerve: after all, if these pieces are too ephemeral to have left a lingering impression even in *his* memory, then where on earth does he find the audacity to hawk them to us in hardcover? In one of them he dismisses bound collections of screenplays as “non-books”; even the published script of *Citizen Kane*, he says, is a non-book. What, one wonders, if its contents are indeed so utterly forgettable, does that make *Film Flam*?

Yet the book, in truth, has more to recommend it than McMurtry’s foreword would lead one to believe. And the reader who is aghast at McMurtry’s flippant attitude toward his essays soon realizes that self-deprecation is one of McMurtry’s favorite devices: he seemingly never fails to take advantage of an opportunity to put his own work down. For example, in his essay on *Lovin’ Molly*, he says that his first two novels, *Horseman*, *Pass By* (which became the Paul Newman movie *Hud*) and *Leaving Cheyenne*, “incorporate, at best, a 22-year-old’s vision,” and that he is not “overjoyed to see the literary results of [that vision] applauded.” In another essay he

The Structural Image

William Christenberry

Jim Clark

Anthony-Petr Górný

Bryan Hunt

Rebecca Johnson

Winifred Lutz

John Monti

John Newman

Mimmo Paladino

Joel Shapiro

Robert Stackhouse

remarks that “[w]hen *Hud* was released, I used to shock people a good deal by saying that I thought the movie was better than the book” (although Martin Ritt, the film’s director, “still managed to cripple the film dramatically by chaining himself hand and foot to the ass-backwards structure of my novel”). And he confesses that, when writing the screenplay of *The Last Picture Show*, he realized how weak the book was. To be sure, he wasn’t very happy with the novel to begin with: “It was the flattest and most hastily written of my books—dashed off, in fact, in a fit of pique at my hometown—and by the time it was published I had ceased to think well of it.” But it wasn’t till he went back to the novel to adapt it for Peter Bogdanovich that McMurtry saw just how lousy it was. All at once he realized that it was “a novel about a middle-aged courtship in a small town,” and that he’d made a mistake in focusing on “those uninteresting kids” who were his major characters.

Why does McMurtry keep running himself down? Part of it is doubtless sheer native honesty. Part is probably egocentrism: to read a few of the pieces in *Film Flam* is to realize that self-deprecation provides authors with a simple means of writing endlessly about themselves without seeming narcissistic. Part of it is that McMurtry likes the idea of shocking people, likes being viewed as a plainspoken maverick who lives and works and thinks at a considerable remove from the mendacious conformists of Hollywood. And part of it is, I think, that McMurtry, a scion of a big ranching clan, and nephew to a goodly number of macho cattle barons, is secretly embarrassed to be a *writer*, of all things. He doesn’t want us to think he’s interested in *art*, for God’s sake, or to confuse him with those effete types that populate New York and L.A. (McMurtry now lives in Washington, D.C.) In a piece called “Movie-Tripping: My Own Rotten Film Festival”—the longest piece in the book, by the way—he proudly chronicles a weekend that he spent watching seventeen crummy movies in Times Square, movies with names like *Fuzz* and *Eroticon*, like *The*

Night Evelyn Came Out of the Grave and *Tarzan’s Jungle Rebellion*. Why did he waste a weekend in such a manner? Well, for one thing, he seems to *like* crummy movies. And crummy theaters, too: “I have always hated art theaters, art audiences, screening rooms, suburban theaters, and, indeed, decorous moviegoers of any ilk; apparently some severe Methodist suspicion of all fanciness still lurks in my psyche.” He extols “fringe theaters” in “border areas,” theaters that appeal to “anyone with either a taste for street life or participatory theater.” “[T]hese,” he writes, “are the places to see movies. The audience will more than compensate for whatever turgidities there may be in the film.”

In this essay, at any rate (he seems less fatuous elsewhere), McMurtry views film at its best not as art, or as an attempt at art, or even (for that matter) as entertainment, but rather as an occasion for lowbrow socializing. To him, *art* is a dirty word: he likes watching movies with children because they “are even less polite to art than I am,” and likes watching them with “the proletariat” because “[a]rt is a meaningless word to them.” McMurtry complains that “there is just too much art—far more, at least, than *I* can use, either as a writer or as a person.” And he doesn’t buy the notion of art as a form of truth: “[F]or a novelist to suppose that he is wedded to Truth is a flat absurdity. A novelist works with lies. The more constant he is to his craft, the deeper into lies it will lead him. To pretend otherwise is to misunderstand the game of fiction entirely . . . Pigs is pigs, and a lie is a lie—as Protestantism has always insisted.” But it’s not a temptation to lie that compels good authors to write fiction; it’s the desire to capture a universal truth that lies beyond the mundane facts of their everyday lives. And it is because sensitive and intelligent readers recognize these truths as truths—because, in other words, good serious fiction strikes chords of recognition in the depths of their souls—that they are capable of an intense emotional response to such fiction. (Indeed, McMurtry himself admits as much when he

observes that the film of *The Last Picture Show* was successful largely because it reminded its jaded, anomic audiences of “what it had been like to feel.”)

Some of McMurtry’s generalizations about the film world are, to say the least, obvious. “Writers,” he pronounces, “have not made a habit of rushing unbeckoned to Hollywood As ambassadors of the word, they respectfully wait to be summoned.” Perhaps this is true of the handful of successful novelists like McMurtry who moonlight as screenwriters; but the vast majority of screenwriters have indeed rushed unbeckoned to Tinseltown for the express purpose of churning out screenplays and submitting them, unbidden, to producers. The chief problem here, and elsewhere in *Film Flam*, is that McMurtry consistently generalizes about Los Angeles and the film business on the basis of his own somewhat atypical experiences. Not once does he show any sign of ever having swapped anecdotes with other screenwriters—or, for that matter, of having any real interest in another writer’s experiences.

Equally dubious is McMurtry’s belief that most filmmakers “inhabit an ivory tower of literacy.” “The comments filmmakers hear,” he grumbles, “are those of their friends, their eminent critics, their intelligent and educated patrons; they remain largely unaware of the *illiterate* response to what they are doing, and perhaps never really confront the more primitive resources of film.” Now there are a number of things wrong with the contemporary American film, but in these days of *Goonies* and *Gremlins* and *Rocky Balboa* and *Conan the Barbarian*, excessive

literacy certainly isn’t one of them. Nor are most filmmakers out of touch with the unlettered masses. On the contrary, I suspect that most good screenwriters would say that for an illiterate response, one usually need not go further than the powers that be at one’s own studio. These are the people whose comments the typical “film artist” hears most regularly, and to whom he is obliged to pay the most attention. They are people who are desperate to reach the lowest common denominator, who are most comfortable with dialogue rich in four-letter words and street slang, and who—when writers try to slip intelligent, witty dialogue into a script—will remark that it’s “too *uptown*.” Given this state of affairs, McMurtry’s remarks about untapped “primitive resources” are little short of incredible.

But to respond to McMurtry’s provocative comments with such arguments is probably to take *Film Flam* more seriously than it is intended to be taken. Though at times, to be sure, McMurtry presents himself as a bona fide critic of films and of books about film, and as an inside observer of life in the film community, more often he wants us to see him as a less-than-serious outsider—a good old boy from Texas, as it were—who has spent some time in the exotic land of Hollywood, and is eager to retail his impressions and chronicle his adventures. McMurtry is, in short, a storyteller at heart, and *Film Flam*, though it fails to be the enlightening volume of commentary upon the business of filmmaking that one might have hoped it to be, succeeds quite nicely as a charming and funny personal account.

To be published July 15
A special issue of *The New Criterion*

“Our Campaigns”

Alfred H. Barr, Jr., and the Museum of Modern Art:
a biographical chronicle of the years 1930-1944
by Margaret Scolari Barr

with a chronicle of the years 1902-1929
by Rona Roob

Introduction by Hilton Kramer

It has long been recognized that the founding of the Museum of Modern Art in 1929 was a major event in the cultural history of our time, and that Alfred H. Barr, Jr. played a central role in creating both the museum and the new field of study—the study of the modern movement in the visual arts—which have since become firmly established traditions in American intellectual life.

In this special issue of *The New Criterion*, Margaret Scolari Barr—herself an art historian, teacher, and close collaborator in many of her late husband’s professional endeavors—gives us a personal, year-by-year account of Alfred Barr’s career in the most crucial period in the museum’s history. And in a chronicle of Barr’s earlier years as a student, teacher, scholar, and traveller, Rona Roob—the archivist of the Museum of Modern Art—traces the personal intellectual history of the man who came to personify a new kind of art museum and the connoisseurship on which it was based. This special issue will be illustrated by photographs of the key figures and some of the principal exhibitions and acquisitions in MOMA’s early history.

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Professor Kuspit comes to rural Pennsylvania

by Theodore Prescott

The culture mill grinds slowly in rural Pennsylvania. The visit of a “known” artist or critic is an event of some significance—at least to those people who care about and follow the less popular arts. The art-world figures who leave New York for the hinterlands usually do so to deliver a state-of-the-arts address at a college or arts organization. This was the case with Donald B. Kuspit’s visit in February, when he presented the second annual Weiner Lecture in the Fine Arts at Dickinson College in Carlisle.

Dickinson College is the very model of the small, distinguished, liberal-arts college. It has a pedigree (as one of the oldest colleges in the country), a charming campus set in a picturesque town, and a reputation for a commitment to the liberal arts and scholarship in an age of rampant careerism and academic doubt.

Donald Kuspit is a professor of art history at the State University of New York at Stony Brook and a contributing editor of *Art in America*. He was the 1983 recipient of the College Art Association’s Mather Award for distinction in art criticism, and he writes frequently about contemporary art. His topic at Dickinson was “The Status of the Self in Recent Art.”

Professor Kuspit began by telling us how beautiful he found Carlisle and the Dickinson campus, and then launched right into an explanation of his critical assumptions. The first point was that his topic had to be understood in a postmodern context. Ac-

cording to Professor Kuspit, post-modernity is post-stylistic. Concepts like “the new” and “style,” which he believes were the central preoccupations of modernism, are now obsolete. The issue today is not “significant form,” but “significant content.”

Dr. Kuspit went on to explain that artists now only inhabit a “shell of a style.” He was no doubt referring to the current rage for appropriation, where artists step right into the images and styles of other artists the way urban squatters move into abandoned tenements. Postmodern art, he explained, makes possible a new content. He referred to this situation as “decadent,” but hastened to explain that decadence has no pejorative connotation for him. In fact, Professor Kuspit told us that he sees decadence as a virtue—though it was not clear whether he meant stylistic decadence or something more comprehensive.

Given this start, it was not surprising to learn from Professor Kuspit that in post-modernism “the idea of aesthetics has collapsed.” We were told not only that “good taste and judgment are dead,” but also that “the idea of aesthetics was a lie to begin with.” Clement Greenberg was identified as the source of the problem, since he had the poor judgment to believe that “you could separate art and culture.” As the lecture progressed, we saw that Professor Kuspit had more than a few slides to support his point about aesthetics. During the long introduction, however, we were only shown an edgy

and slightly baleful self-portrait by Frida Kahlo, who hovered on the screen behind Professor Kuspit like a Freudian angel.

Having dispensed with aesthetics, Professor Kuspit got down to his thesis. We were told that “psychological reality can never be underestimated” and that “all art of consequence deals with a sense of self.” Thus, any aesthetic satisfaction derived from a work of art is just a form of sublimated psychic need. For Professor Kuspit, apparently, art is a kind of show-and-tell psychodrama, a place where the artist exposes his anxieties, his secret desires, his socially unacceptable self. The particular kind of self that Professor Kuspit sees as significant is the broken or fragmented self, which he likened to the personae described in T. S. Eliot’s “The Hollow Men.” Since in his view post-modernity coincided with the emergence of feminist artists in the 1970s, the truly “disintegral” personality is best represented today by the experience of women.

For Professor Kuspit, the significance of the fragmented or broken self involves judgments about the state of civilization. He told us that the art he was going to show us was narcissistic, but that such narcissism was made necessary by a society that doesn’t provide an adequate mirror for its members. For him, the best recent art makes us see the problems ignored by a culture obsessed with efficiency and technique. Professor Kuspit used Herbert Marcuse’s phrase “the return of the repressed” to illustrate what he meant. Marcuse’s idea is that society represses certain things to achieve its objectives; but those repressed elements return to haunt society in the realm of the taboo and the unconscious.

At this point we started to see Dr. Kuspit’s examples. They were pretty familiar to anyone who reads art magazines. The most useful artist for his purposes was Francesco Clemente—at least we saw a great many slides of his work. But there was a parade of other artists affiliated with the new expressionism, including the German artists Dölkopff, Dahn, and Immendorff, and the Americans Salle, Fischl, Stevens, Basquiat,

Golub, Arneson, and Morris. The repressed contents of Western civilization seemed pretty familiar, too—sex, death, gross social injustice, ecological disaster, impending nuclear annihilation, fear of powerlessness, anxiety about the usefulness of art, and the meaninglessness of it all. At least that’s what Professor Kuspit told us the pictures were about. In the question period one student asked why the content of the art needed to be explained if, as Professor Kuspit maintained, the artists wanted to be society’s conscience. He replied that it wasn’t good for the artist to be too obvious, for it was important for people to become “intimate” with the works in order to understand them.

What was obvious from Professor Kuspit’s narrative accompanying the slides was his own criteria for serious and important art. For instance, he told us that “sensitive artists feel themselves in a situation of living death.” Later he explained that the apparent ugliness of some of the work “is the only true beauty that’s permissible.” Throughout the presentation he implied that the measure of any real artist is his ability to confront a viewer with the relentless nastiness of reality.

It was equally clear that the only self worth considering, and by extension the only self that sensitive people could possibly want to be, is the “disintegral” self. He showed us two large portrait heads by Leon Golub, one of Generalissimo Franco and the other of Nelson Rockefeller. He told us the message of the portraits: “to become an integrated self you must become a bastard—and pursue absolute power.” During the question period I asked him if he believed that it is morally preferable to be a broken person rather than a whole person. He emphatically assured me that it was, although he qualified his answer by saying that we all need to be whole enough to get by.

Professor Kuspit concluded his lecture by saying, “What I’ve tried to do is, I’ve tried to give you a tour de force of misery.” Since in his view this art depicts problems that our culture avoids, the polite applause that followed his talk sounded oddly out of place. It seemed to effortlessly draw the curtain of

social convention back over the theatrics of misery, without the slightest ripple of discomfort. If any consciences were quickened by their encounter with the repressed contents of civilization, they were remarkably reserved about it. But of course Professor Kuspit's "content" really constitutes a thoroughly familiar and recognizable viewpoint in academia. Thus, the applause was probably less a denial of what we'd been shown than an indication that people were acquainted with Dr. Kuspit's ideological posture.

There were really two familiar themes in Dr. Kuspit's presentation at Dickinson College. The first theme, which is an article of faith for the champions of postmodernism, was that content is more important than aesthetics in recent art. This notion is troubling in itself. It simplifies and distorts our understanding of modernism, and suggests that artists must choose between aesthetics and subject matter. But beyond this, Professor Kuspit was arguing for an idea of "significant content" that is limited to the popular causes of the intellectual Left. Clearly, the intellectual Left is hardly the still small voice

of academia. In actual fact, the ideas and opinions of the Left receive generous attention in colleges and universities. They are familiar ideas that yield predictable insights.

The thrust of Professor Kuspit's point of view is that misery is the only genuine human condition. According to him, anything else—including anything else in art—amounts to sheer escapism. So, not only has aesthetic content been excised in the name of radical social analysis, but vast tracts of human hope, experience, and pleasure have been bulldozed away and paved over with uniform ideological concrete. Ironically, Professor Kuspit seems to have appropriated the Victorian quest for propriety, and inverted it to feed the Marxist appetite for constant capitalist misery. This is the real return of the repressed.

I left the lecture at the same time as a young student. I would guess she was a sophomore or junior. I asked her how she liked the lecture. "It was good," she replied with a kind of breathy cheerfulness. "I learned a lot." We walked silently out into the cold night air.

Translating Montale

To the Editors:

It was my hope that William Jay Smith's malevolent and remarkably unsubstantiated attack on my translation of Montale's *The Storm and Other Things* (October, 1986) would need no rebuttal. The uncanny badness of the alternative versions he proposes and the implicit perversion of Montale's poetics should, for any intelligent reader equipped with even modest Italian, have invalidated the review. But his disingenuous response to Gertrude Hooker's defense of both Montale and me (February, 1987) reveals that he is still bent on darkening counsel. In the hope of preventing further damage to Montale and in defense of my own years of labor, I offer the following comments on what seem to me (interpretative differences apart) the most debated and revealing points at issue.

1. "Carbuncle blaze" is my translation of the phrase *balenio di carbonchio*, an allusion to the red gill of the trout in Montale's poem, "La trota nera." Mr. Smith believes I have erred and that this phrase should be translated "ruby dazzle." Despite his disclaimer, though, it is Montale, not me, whom Smith charges with a slip that "throws the poem off balance." It was Montale, not I, who wrote *balenio di carbonchio* (carbuncle), and not *rubino* (ruby). Smith censures my rendering *carbonchio* as "carbuncle" because 1) a carbuncle is a pustular wen; and 2) "carbuncle" in the sense of a jewel is, according to his dictionary, obsolete. But in Italian *carbonchio* means both a jewel and a pustular wen; and Montale deliberately

chose this word, and not *rubino*. Why? Surely because its very harshness throws it into relief, thereby forcing the serious reader to inspect it, to consider its meaning and etymology. Here, as so often elsewhere, Montale is bent upon energizing the etymon: Latin, *carbo* (coal); *carbunculus* (living coal—i.e. red coal). The poem's title is "La trota nera" (the black trout); the trout surfaces from the river's *ipogei* (underground vaults). Earthy black coal when ignited volatilizes, as in Dante, into spiritual red flame. At stake is the transforming imagery with which Montale suggests the process whereby the material and carnal (in this case the woman known as the Vixen) is momentarily inspirited, thus inspiring him. Mr. Smith, blind to intimations that exceed his own earthbound imagination, misses the point, prettifying it with the trumpery phrase, "ruby dazzle." My "carbuncle blaze" is also a mistake, Smith avers, since *balenio* means, as it indeed does, a "continual flashing." All quite true; but if my "carbuncle blaze" is wrong, why is his "ruby dazzle" (which does not in any way connote continual flashing) right? "Glitter," I assume, is too tacky even for Smith's delight in bauble-phrases. In any case, he can't have it both ways; if I am wrong, so is he, and by his own argument. Finally, whatever Smith's dictionary may claim, the O.E.D. (and even the Random House College Dictionary) supports the currency of carbuncle as jewel. But even if they did not, Smith's point would be irrelevant and invalid. Montale, saturated in a tradition he deemed capable of being renewed, repeatedly employed archaic, even obsolete words in the hope of reviving them

(and the “culture” that had, to its own impoverishment, forgotten them), above all in *The Occasions* and *The Storm and Other Things* where he struggled to renew the neo-Platonist poetics of Dante and the poets of the *Dolce stil nuovo*.

2. “The Eel.” Smith claims that in my translation of this poem I have confused the eel with the salmon; as I pointed out in my notes, the confusion is Montale’s, not mine; and it is obviously deliberate. The poet’s purpose is fusion, transformation. Smith translates (?) what he thinks Montale should, according to Smith’s superior poetics, have written, not what Montale wrote; the result is the prosy inadequacy noted by Dr. Hooker. The eel, Montale says, *risale in profondo, sotto la piena avversa*. *Risale* does not, cannot mean, merely “swims upstream”; *sotto l’avversa piena* means not “against the opposing flood” (in Italian this would be *controcorrente*; cf. “L’estate” in *The Occasions*), but precisely *under* it. Further, Montale pointedly enjambes *risale* (“rises back up”) with *in profondo* (“at the bottom”); the enjambment requires the conscientious translator to respond. Smith’s rendering (“swimming upstream against their currents”) evades the problem altogether because his consistently superficial reading of Montale has failed to detect it. My own version was an effort to convey Montale’s (vividly Bergsonian) movement by unpacking, even at the cost of lengthening the line, the eel’s progress as it “struggles upstream, hugging the bottom, under the flood of the downward torrent . . .” Not compact; but it keeps the meaning and, I hope, the eel’s momentum. Smith dismisses my phrase, “hugging the bottom,” as “pure caricature since by its very nature an eel cannot *hug* anything.” But any dictionary which provides examples validates my usage; e.g., “the path hugs the coast”; “the car hugged the curve”—both objects far less animate than the eel. Finally, given Montale’s transformational habits elsewhere and the eel’s manifestly transcendental progress here, its salmonlike behavior is hardly surprising. And if in the last line Clizia, the poem’s Dantesque *donna*, is asked to recognize the eel as her sister, why should the salmon be denied kinship? Smith’s Horatio-like reluctance to confront Montale’s metaphysical intimations prevents him from understanding the poem and translating it with accuracy and cumulative

power. Which is not to claim that I have done so; merely that I have not coarsened the original or mindlessly adapted it to my own preconceptions.

3. The title: *La bufera e altro*. Once again, the problem is Smith’s obtuse refusal to accept Montale’s effort to convey a reality “beyond this world,” or as the Italians say, *aldilà*—a reality represented in poem after poem by the signs and presence of his (and also our) redemptive Dantesque lady. *Altro*, as Smith himself allows, means “other things” (including, we can be sure, Dante’s God who, by virtue of his exalted “otherness,” is termed *Altrui*); but the phrase “other things” strikes Smith as trivializing, banal. No, he says, no matter what Montale wrote or meant, the title should obviously be *The Storm and Other Poems*. But surely such a title implies (by analogy, let’s say, with Eliot’s *The Waste Land and Other Poems*) that the storm in question refers to the first poem in the book (entitled “The Storm”) and that the succeeding poems are comparatively minor. But the “storm” of the title is in fact the *thematic* storm—the *bufera infernal* of passion and also the political storm of fascism. “Other things” is meant to suggest, like a halo of intimation, a nearly desperate hope, the saving reality of that “otherness” beyond us, of which Clizia is the covenant and sign, and which she brings to bear upon man’s hellish condition. Such an intimation should not be spelled out; for the average Italian reader, I believe, *altro* must have seemed just as banal as “other things” in English. And this, *pace* Smith, is precisely what was wanted here. The reader capable of reading *beyond, under, or into* the banal particular will, if he reads the poems with patient understanding, come to recognize the “otherness” of the universal it intends.

My main complaint against Mr. Smith is that, in his zeal to disparage my translation, he has trivialized and distorted Montale’s poetry almost beyond recognition. No appeal to his credentials as poet and translator can disguise the ineptitude of his efforts to show how Montale ought to be translated and also the *Lumpenpoetik* by which he validates those efforts. That he lived down the street from the son of Montale’s wife by her first husband, that Spender visited him in Via Quarlunco, etc., only suggests that critical authority cannot be acquired by rubbing elbows with one’s

literary betters. Finally, the mean-spiritedness he detects in Dr. Hooker's trenchant comments on his own hatchet job reveals nothing so much as the complacency of the critic who cannot imagine that his authority could even be questioned, much less shown up, and a quite enviable inability to recognize the *ressentiment* from which his malice derives.

William Arrowsmith
Boston, MA

William Jay Smith replies:

In almost half a century of publication as poet, critic, and translator, I have never before been called complacent, earthbound, or malevolent. Although I cannot admit to being in any way "bent on darkening counsel," I must say as briefly as possible that if it is a *Lumpenpoetik* to insist that a translation of poetry be a poetic re-creation, then I am indeed guilty. In Mr. Arrowsmith's prizewinning volume, I was presented with translations that had been heralded as brilliant English renderings of a twentieth-century master. What I found was a series of useful, and often perceptive, critical notes around what was essentially a trot, a literal version that not only lacked any poetic quality but was, in its painstaking all-inclusiveness, frequently as unreliable as it was unreadable. Poet-translators as diverse as Lord Byron, George Santayana, Charles Tomlinson, and James Merrill have produced translations of Italian poetry that exist, on their own, as memorable poems in English. William Arrowsmith has

not; he has left off precisely where such translators begin.

No poet that I know would settle for a phrase so lacking in felicity as "carbuncle blaze," which is not even literally correct. It is true, of course, that in prose anything can *hug* anything else, even an eel, the river bottom. In poetry, which is not written with dictionaries, especially in the context of Montale's poem, it cannot. It is ironic that Mr. Arrowsmith should call attention to Montale's careful enjambment since the lumbering line to which I objected ("who struggles upstream hugging the bottom, under the flood of the downward torrent") is one of the most awkward that I have encountered in a very long time in what passes these days for verse. Montale's title is literally "The Storm *and More*." Impossible in English, as is "*and Other Things*." Some *other* solution must be found; what *more* can one say?

All writing is self-revelation; and Mr. Arrowsmith has revealed himself in his translations, as in his apparently unending critical appendage to them, a pedant pure and simple. In the poem cited, the trout, when it catches the scent (*not* "sniffs" as Mr. Arrowsmith renders *annusa*) of the Doctors of Divinity hunched over the water, turns away, and in turning, flashes like a red jewel, reminding the poet of a strand of the Vixen's red hair uncoiling in her bath. That dazzling and blinding turn, familiar to anyone who has watched a trout, escapes the learned doctors in the poem just as it escapes the pedant in his translation. A poetic evocation of this witty and transcendent turn awaits the proper translator.

Editor's note: Readers are reminded that no regular issues of *The New Criterion* are published during July or August. This year, a special summer supplement will be mailed to subscribers on July 15 and will be available at newsstands. (For information, see page 82 of this issue.) The next regular issue of *The New Criterion* will appear in September.

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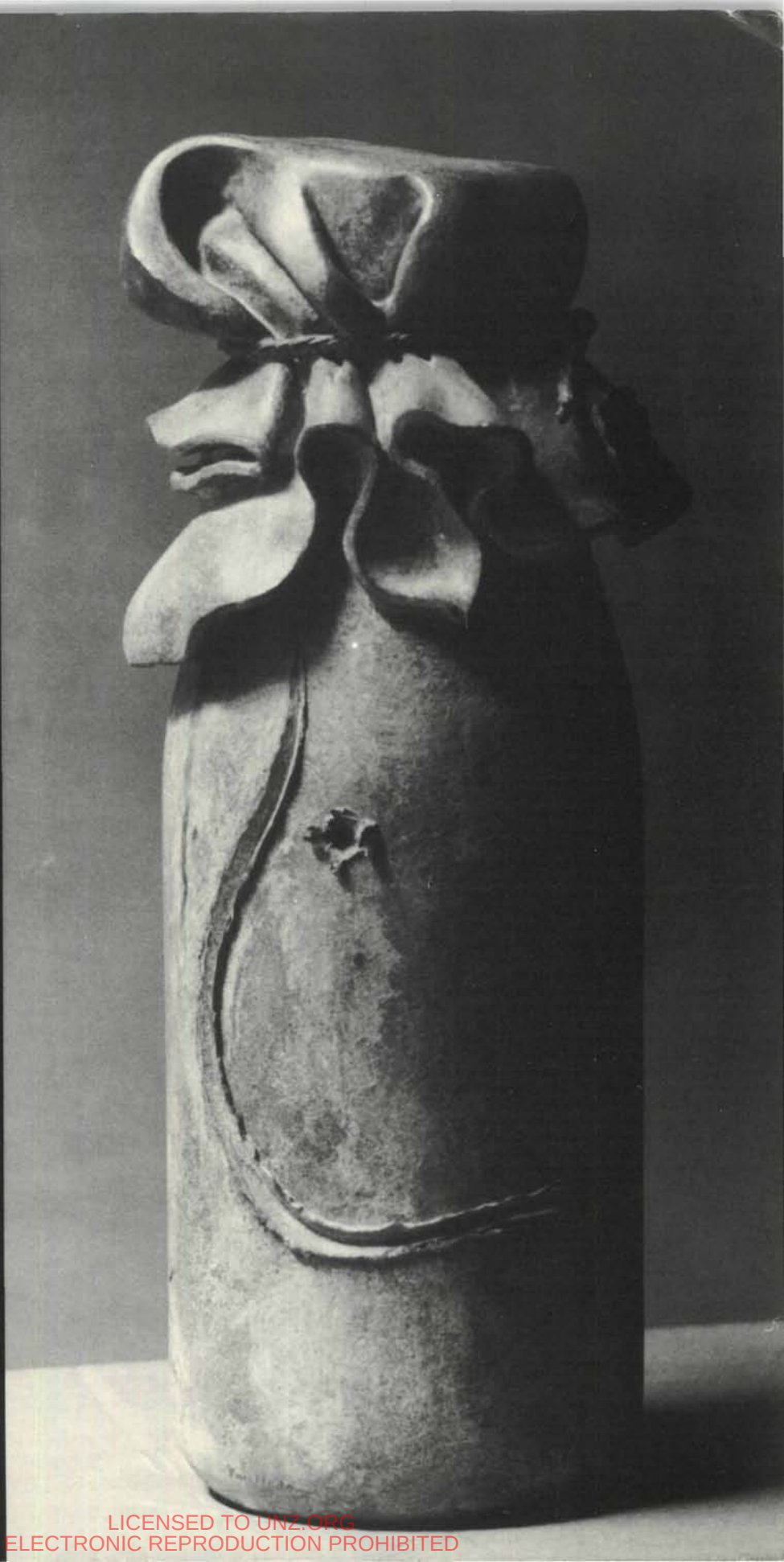
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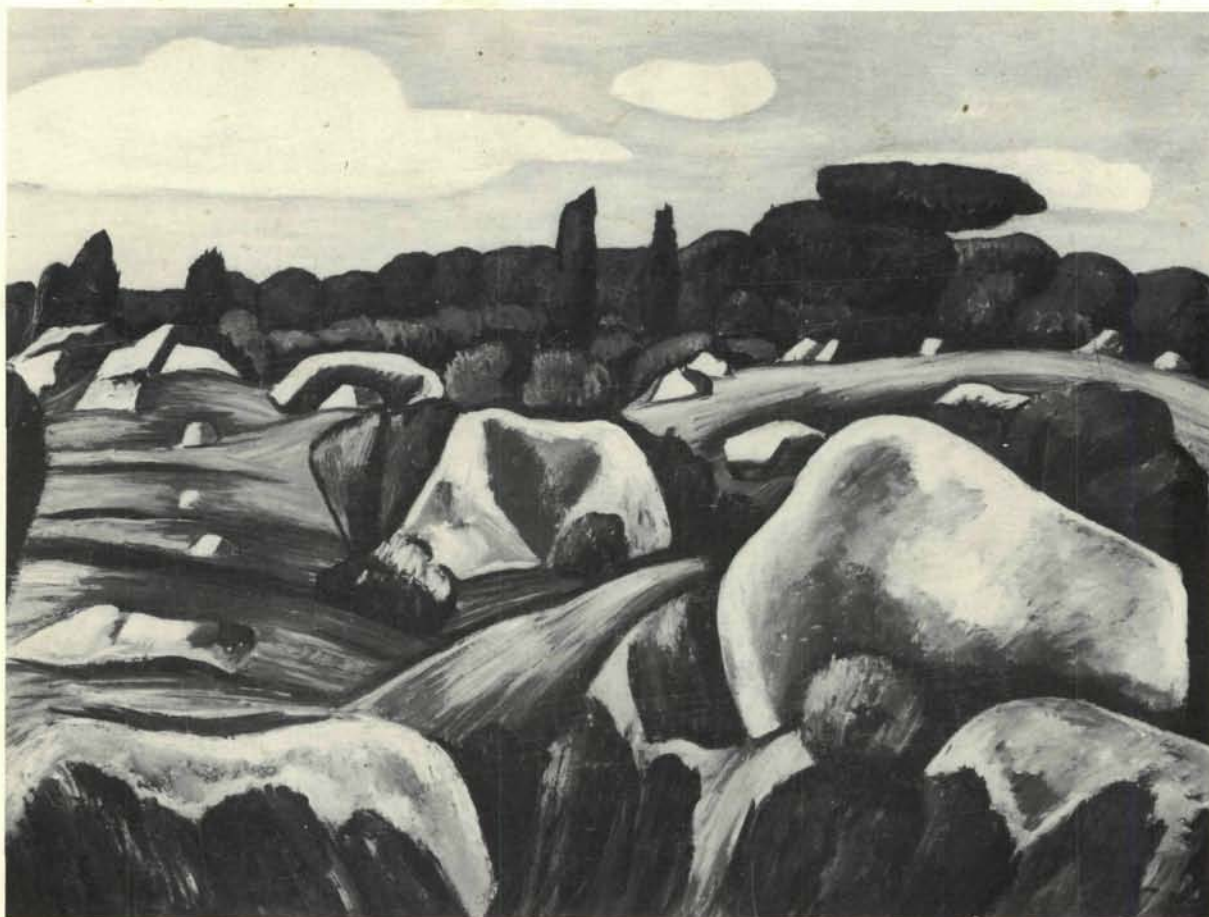
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